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Allegiances

SUNCLAN

LEADER **Dawnstar -** Golden brown and white tabby she-cat with green eyes

DEPUTY **Cinderflame -** Dark gray she-cat with amber eyes

MEDICINE CATS **Pebblestep** - Gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

Honeyfrost - Golden and white she-cat with green eyes

WARRIORS *(toms and she-cats without kits)*

Icepetal- White she-cat with blue eyes

Snowtail- Fluffy white she-cat with blue eyes

Applespots- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Dovepaw

Redclaw- Dark ginger tom with amber eyes

Adderstrike- Silver tom with lighter tabby markings and dark blue eyes

Fawnheart- Light brown she-cat with lighter spots on her flank and pale green eyes
Apprentice, Sedgepaw

Lionclaw- Golden tom with amber eyes and abnormally large claws

Goldenleaf- Golden she-cat with green eyes

Turtleblaze- Mottled brown tom with green eyes
Apprentice, Petalpaw

Yarrowtail- Fluffy, pale gray tom with pale green eyes

Heatherflight- Light brown she-cat with green eyes

Flamepetal- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Brackenpelt- Dark ginger tom with amber eyes

Cloudspots- Fluffy gray and white tom with blue eyes
Apprentice, Burnpaw

Rosewind - Ginger she-cat with a white tipped tail and green eyes
Apprentice, Hollypaw

Briarrose - Small brown she-cat with amber eyes

Earthpelt- Brown she-cat with white chest and paws with green eyes

Mudfall- Dark gray tom with green eyes

Flashtail- White tom with green eyes

Falconheart- Golden Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Larkthorn- Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

APPRENTICES *(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)*

Dovepaw- Silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (Icepool and Adderstrike's daughter)

Petalpaw- Silver she-cat with white tipped ears and blue eyes (Icepool and Adderstrike's daughter)

Sedgepaw- Fluffy gray she-cat with green eyes (Icepool and Adderstrike's daughter)

Hollypaw- Ginger she-cat with green eyes (Goldenleaf and

Redclaw's daughter)

Burnpaw- Ginger tom with green eyes (Goldenleaf and Redclaw's son)

QUEENS *(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)*

Squirreltail- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Cherryleaf- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes, nursing Cloudspots's kits (Snowkit, white she-cat, Windkit, gray she-cat and Bluekit, blue-gray she-cat)

ELDERS *(former warriors and queens, now retired)*

Sandfoot- Tortoiseshell she-cat with distinct ginger paws

Snakewhisker- Gray tom with green eyes and long whiskers

Crowfur- Black she-cat with blue eyes

Rainears- Black she-cat with white ears and blue eyes

ASHCLAN

LEADER **Riverstar**- Blue gray she-cat with blue eyes

DEPUTY **Ashblaze**- Dark gray tom with amber eyes

MEDICINE CATS **Skyfeather**- Silver tabby tom with black markings and amber eyes

Blackstorm - Jet black tom with ice blue eyes

WARRIORS

Harewhisker- Light brown tom

Petalshine- Silver and white tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Dustpaw

Foxfeather- Ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Leafpaw

Stormheart- Gray tom with dark green eyes
Apprentice, Rabbitpaw

Haresong- Light brown she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Primrosepaw

Lilyclaw- Gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Ravensong- Black tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Nightheart - Black she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes

APPRENTICES

Leafpaw- Mottled brown she-cat with green eyes

Dustpaw- Pale brown tom with amber eyes

Rabbitpaw- Pale brown and white she-cat with green eyes

Primrosepaw - Ginger she-cat with green eyes

QUEENS

Puddleclaw- Gray she-cat with green eyes, nursing Stormheart's kits (Hailkit, silver tabby she-cat and Sagekit, gray tabby she-cat)

Silvermoon- Silver tabby she-cat with blue, expecting Ashblaze's kits

ELDERS

Cloverstrike- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Nightstorm- Dark gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Crowstep- Gray tom with with black paws and amber eyes

Featherfall - Silver tabby tom with blue eyes

MOONCLAN

LEADER **Shadowstar**- Black tom with yellow eyes

DEPUTY **Violetfur**- Dark gray she-cat with bluish- purple eyes

MEDICINE CATS **Ravenheart**- Black tom with a white flecked chest.

Oneflight - Pale gray tabby tom with blue eyes

WARRIORS

Pigeonpelt-Light gray tom with pale yellow eyes

Feathercloud- Fluffy white she-cat with blue eyes

Shadeflower-Black and gray she-cat with amber eyes

Swiftheart -Gray tom with green eyes

Tallsong - Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Ebonywing- Black she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes

Brokenclaw - Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Icepool-White she-cat with dark blue eyes.

Ashfeather- Black she-cat with blue eyes

Daisyheart- Silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Breezetail- Black and white tom with blue eyes

Rainpetal - Black she-cat with blue eyes eyes

QUEENS

Frostfire- White she-cat with pale gray flecks and green eyes, nursing Pigeonpelt's kits (Ferretkit, speckled brown and white tom, Mothkit, white and gray she-kit and Swankit, fluffy white she-kit)

Mosswind- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes, nursing Swiftheart's kits (Minnowkit, silver she-cat, Shellkit, speckled gray tom and Meadowkit, tortoiseshell she-cat)

ELDERS

Brambleflight-Dark brown tom with green eyes

Ravenwing- Pretty dark gray she-cat with dark blue eyes

Dovestorm- Light gray she-cat with pale blue eyes

LICHENCLAN

LEADER **Timberstar**- Brown tom with amber eyes

DEPUTY **Larkclaw**- Brown tabby she-cat with a white tipped tail.

MEDICINE CAT **Roseheart**- Pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

WARRIORS

Twigheart-Small light brown she-cat with green eyes

Heatherwind- White and black she- cat with blue eyes

Brackenheart-Red-brown tabby with a light brown chest

Foxtail- Ginger tom with a white tail
Apprentice, Briarpaw

Flamewhisker- Ginger she-cat

Seedclaw-Black and white tom with green eyes

Rowanwhisker-Dark red-brown she-cat with dark green eyes
Apprentice, Kestrelpaw

Flowerheart- Pale brown she-cat with green eyes

Stumptail- Small brown tom with amber eyes

APPRENTICES

Kestrelpaw- Brown she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Heatherwind and Timberstar)

Briarpaw- Pale brown she-cat with green eyes (Daughter of Heatherwind and Timberstar)

QUEENS

Leafsong-Light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, nursing Foxtail's kits (Dapplekit, brown spotted tabby and Emberkit, ginger she-cat)

ELDERS

Maplepool- Brown and cream she-cat with amber eyes

Mousethorn - Long haired brown tom with green eyes

Owlheart-Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

[image]

Prologue

Shadows crossed the ground, the towering, dying trees above blocked out the starless sky. The dying flora gave off a musty, dank scent that Falconclaw had become some used to. He lifted his head, flicking his ears as he heard pawsteps. He padded through the forest, twitching his tail. He hoped that for once Thornstar would be on time for one of their meetings. He was always late. *Constantly disappointing me, ever since he was an apprentice.* The trees thinned out and Falconclaw kicked away a dead, fallen branch.

In a small clearing Falconclaw saw Thornstar, talking with his son Thrushclaw and Branchfur of LichenClan. There was another cat there, a cat by the name of Oakpelt. He was a former SunClan warrior who killed a former SunClan medicine cat and his kits for breaking the warrior code. Falconclaw had heard stories of the warrior and admired his duty to his Clan. Falconclaw and Oakpelt had made quick friends once Falconclaw entered the Dark Forest. Falconclaw twitched his ears and stepped into view, the other Dark Forest cats turned to see him.

"Welcome, Falconclaw." Oakpelt dipped his head, his brown tabby pelt was slightly faded. Falconclaw could see the trees through his body. *Almost forgotten.* Falconclaw thought. He sat down, facing Thornstar.

"How did Nightheart's training continue? Did she welcome you back?" Falconclaw questioned.

"It went well," Thornstar blinked. "She was hesitant at first, thinking that she no longer needed training since she was a warrior, but I convinced her otherwise."

"Good." Falconclaw looked up at the brownish-gray sky. "I'll be visiting with Falconheart for the first time tonight." He swayed his tail. "We need to get more done than training, if we want to make some decent progress with them."

"What do you mean?" Thrushclaw tilted his head.

"Training Falconheart and Nightheart will only get so far, they're dedicated to their Clans. Nightheart is incredibly loyal to her Clan, she won't turn against Riverstar easily."

"We need to turn them against the Clans?" Thrushclaw was still missing the point. Falconclaw couldn't believe that his own kin was so dense.

"Of course." Oakpelt spoke up. "You've convinced both Nightheart and Falconheart that you're training them to protect their Clans, but if we want any control over either AshClan or SunClan we need Falconheart and Nightheart to become their leaders. If Nightheart and Falconheart lead their Clans at our command, then not only can we rid the Clans of impure blood but we can get rid of Dawnstar and Riverstar."

"Exactly." Falconheart stood up. "Dawnstar made me sick, taking in a rogue. Not to mention the kittypet blood that still taints SunClan. All of Dovewish's kin must be eradicated." He turned around. "The same goes for AshClan, they also took in a rogue."

"Once these two are leaders we can modify the warrior code, so that any cat who mates with a cat who isn't from their Clan shall be killed." Oakfur growled. "No cats like Ravenwing will ever exist again."

"And what about Blackstorm and Honeyfrost?" Thornstar stepped forward. "We've all seen what's been going on between them." He curled his lip. "Could we really force them to kill their own siblings?"

"If not," Falconclaw flexed his claws. "Then we'll make Nightheart kill Honeyfrost and Falconheart kill Blackstorm. I don't care if Honeyfrost is my kin or not, she's a disgrace to SunClan."

"Blood doesn't matter," Thornstar mewed from across the clearing. "We need to teach that to them. It doesn't matter if we're related or not." Falconclaw and Thornstar locked gazes, they both knew the validity behind that statement.

"Can you really say that?" Falconclaw tilted his head slightly and narrowed his amber eyes. "You took a mate and had a kits. You fell in love and nearly threw everything away."

Thornstar stood up, unsheathing his claws. "I had kits so that our bloodline could continue."

"Tigertail and Bramblepelt had kits, and Cherryleaf had kits with the kin of a kittypet." Falconclaw flicked his tail.

"And I *never* loved Applespots. She meant nothing to me, and her kits don't mean anything to me either."

Falconclaw sneered. "I'm not talking about Applespots."

Thornstar's eyes flashed with hatred, he took a step closer with challenging eyes. "You seem to have forgotten who killed you."

"And yet," Falconclaw faced Thornstar, only a mouselength away from him. "I'm still in charge of you. Even in death you still listen to *my* orders. You don't dare deny me because you know I'd still kill you." Falconclaw turned away, flicking his tail. "After all, Thornstar," He glanced over his shoulder. "It would only be fair for *me* to kill *you.*"

Thornstar remained silent, Falconclaw walked away holding his head high. Thornstar was full of arrogance, he thought that just because he became leader of AshClan he was better than Falconclaw, but he hadn't even become a leader in StarClan's eyes, he had just changed his name. However, as much as he loved taunting Thornstar, Falconclaw had other business to attend to.

Falconclaw waited in the trees, watching the shadows until eventually they formed the shape of Falconheart. His sharp amber eyes blinked and glanced around in confusion. Falconheart turned a circle, as if he had forgotten where was. "Falconclaw?" Falconheart called into the forest.

At his words, Falconclaw stepped out of the shadows and faced his apprentice. "Welcome back." Falconclaw said, looking over Falconheart. He had grown since their last meeting. He had the

muscles of a warrior and he looked grown, but there was still something off. In his amber eyes showed the arrogance and naivety of an apprentice.

"I haven't seen you in a while." Falconheart mewed. "I was beginning to wonder if you got left behind in the forest."

Falconclaw shook his head. "No, Falconheart I've been watching you this entire time. I saw everything that happened on the journey. I was right there beside you when you killed that rogue."

Something flashed in Falconheart's eyes, was he guilty about killing the rogue? "You did what you had to do, Falconheart." Falconclaw assured him, he didn't need his apprentice feeling guilty about killing some flea-bitten rogue. Not if he was going to be killing his own Clanmates in time.

"I don't feel bad, not really." Falconheart's tail twitched. "But it feels strange, I've never taken another cat's life before. I killed Primrosepaw's father."

Falconclaw rolled his eyes. "That rogue should be the last thing on your mind." He growled. "I don't agree with Riverstar's or Dawnstar's decisions to bring in rogues."

"Flashtail isn't bad." Falconheart mewed. "He's brave and a good fighter." Anger snapped inside of Falconclaw, he turned on Falconheart with his teeth bared.

"*Flashtail* is a flea-bitten rogue who belongs on the dirty streets of a twolegpalce! He's not a warrior and he never will be! Loners, rogues and kittypets do not belong in Clans!" Falconheart took a slight step back. Falconclaw took a deep breath, calming his anger. "Regardless." Falconclaw turned away. "I wanted you to take some time to settle down in your new home before we got back to training."

"Training?" Falconheart mewed, confused. "I'm a warrior now, do I really need more training?"

Falconclaw chuckled, he should've seen this coming. "Do you think

that once a cat earns their warrior name that they have nothing else to learn? You think that now you're the brave and mighty Falconheart?"

Falconheart looked away. "I guess not."

Falconclaw narrowed his eyes. "What happened? What happened to the brave and cocky little apprentice I had? You kill a cat and suddenly you act like a scared rabbit." Falconheart looked up, a small amount of anger flowing in his eyes. "Maybe I should just find another apprentice. One who isn't afraid to get a little bit of blood on his claws."

"I'm *not* afraid." Falconheart stepped forward, Falconclaw always admired his determination.

"Well you certainly seem like it." Falconclaw taunted. "I want my apprentice back, the one who would claw out my throat if I challenged him."

"You still have him." Falconheart's claws dug into the soil beneath his paws.

"Then let me see him." Falconclaw urged and Falconheart jumped forward with claws and teeth bared. For a moment, Falconclaw was overjoyed that he finally had a worthy fighting opponent once more. *Leaf-bare may be over, but the Clans have a whole new storm coming their way.*

Chapter 1

"Keep your mind focused, Sedgepaw." Falconheart instructed the apprentice, she sat with her head held high and her green eyes shimmering with pride and determination. "You can do this." He urged her.

"Thanks for doing my assessment with me." Sedgepaw purred. "I'm glad I have you and not Mudfall."

"I can hear you, you know." Mudfall grumbled a few taillengths away as he sat with Dovepaw who snickered at the conversation. "Believe it or not, Falconheart isn't the greatest warrior in the forest."

"Don't tell Sedgepaw that." Dovepaw teased. She and Petalpaw laughed together while Sedgepaw looked away bashfully, licking her chest fur. Falconheart suddenly felt awkward, what were Dovepaw and Petalpaw talking about?

"Let's get this assessment started, shall we?" Fawnheart mewed. "This is the first assessment in our new territory and I want it to go well."

"I want Falconheart and Sedgepaw to go near the AshClan border," Turtleblaze began, looking around the territory. "Dovepaw and Mudfall can go near the MoonClan border and Earthpelt and Petalpaw can go hunt near the gathering hollow border. Catch as much prey as you can and remember that we will be watching you at all times."

Falconheart was particularly excited, he missed out on his warrior assessment and wanted to prove himself. He also was excited to help out Sedgepaw pass hers. Even in the two moons that they had lived in the mountains, Sedgepaw had matured into a powerful, brave and dedicated she-cat.

"Let's get going." Falconheart nudged Sedgepaw slightly and the two

of them headed towards the AshClan border. Falconheart kept his nose in the air, ready to scent any prey. Now that it was newleaf the forest was overflowing with prey, Falconheart had spent so long living in the old, dying forest and then travelling through leaf-bare that he had forgotten what it was like to have a full belly.

Sedgepaw suddenly stopped Falconheart, her nose twitching and her eyes on high alert. "I smell squirrel." The fluffy apprentice dropped into a crouch and began tracking down the squirrel. Falconheart dropped down as well, catching the squirrel she had scented as well. Falconheart watched Sedgepaw stalk through the trees. He noticed how graceful and steady her pose was. *She really is talented.* Falconheart watched her closely as she approached the red-furred creature.

With a swift and graceful pounce, Sedgepaw leapt forward and caught the squirrel with a clean bite to the neck. "Great catch." Falconheart purred as Sedgepaw turned around with prideful green eyes. "Let's bury it and continue."

Falconheart and Sedgepaw continued on their hunt until Falconheart caught the scent of a mouse. He alerted Sedgepaw silently with his tail and got the she-cat's attention. She dropped into a crouch, hiding in the undergrowth. Falconheart spotted a fat mouse nibbling on seeds at the base of a tall oak tree.

Falconheart positioned himself on the other side of the mouse so he could send it running towards Sedgepaw when he went after it. He locked eyes with Sedgepaw and gave her a slight nod. Sedgepaw readied herself and Falconheart shot forward. The mouse was clearly alerted and ran forwards, straight into Sedgepaw's claws.

"Nice job." Falconheart praised and trotted over to her.

"You too." Sedgepaw's eyes glowed. She looked around. "We've barely started and we've already got two pieces of prey. We'll leave Dovepaw and Petalpaw in the dust!" Falconheart chuckled, she shared his sense of competition.

Falconheart and Sedgepaw continued hunting, covering as much ground as possible together. They manage to catch two more

squirrels, three mice and a bird. Falconheart and Sedgepaw held their heads high as they rounded up their prey to bring back to Turtleblaze, Fawnheart and Applespots.

When they reached the sandy training area, Petalpaw and Earthpaw had already returned. "Wow!" Petalpaw mewed in awe. "You guys caught so much prey!" Falconheart looked at Earthpelt's and Petalpaw's catch, they had three squirrels and three mice.

"You both did very well." Fawnheart praised. Falconheart didn't think he had ever gotten a compliment from Fawnheart before, it was almost more important than getting praise from Falconclaw.

After a few moments, Mudfall and Dovepaw returned as well. Their catch was three squirrels, a mouse and a sparrow. Falconheart took great satisfaction in knowing that he and Sedgepaw had caught the most prey. Falconheart recalled a few moons ago when he had an assessment with Earthpelt and Mudfall when they were apprentices and he had caught the least amount of prey. Now he had the most.

"Great job, all of you." Applespots purred. "I definitely think all three of you are ready to be warriors."

"I agree," Turtleblaze added. "You've proven time and time again that you're all incredibly strong and loyal SunClan warriors."

Petalpaw, Dovepaw and Sedgepaw jumped around, squealing in excitement. "We're going to be warriors! We're finally going to be warriors!" Falconheart, Earthpelt and Mudfall all watched in amusement. He knew the excitement of becoming a warrior, but he hadn't acted quite like these three. *Maybe it's a she-cat thing.*

"Let's head back to camp so we can tell Dawnstar." Fawnheart mewed and the group of cats headed back towards camp. Sedgepaw and her sisters padded confidently back to camp where SunClan was alive and active.

Redclaw and Lionclaw were having a conversation over some prey, Cherryleaf and Squirreltail shared tongues outside the nursery while Bluekit, Windkit and Snowkit played with a ball of moss. The newest elders, Rainears and Crowfur, were sunning themselves with

Snakewhisker and Sandfoot.

Larkthorn, who had become a warrior about a moon ago, was talking with Briarrose and Brackenpelt outside of the warriors den. And the newest apprentices, Hollypaw and Burnpaw, were talking with their mentors, Rosewind and Cloudspots.

Falconheart watched as Turtleblaze, Applespots and Fawnheart went to Dawnstar's den. Falconheart waited outside with Sedgepaw, Dovepaw and Petalpaw. "Do you think I'm ready to be a warrior, Falconheart?" Sedgepaw questioned, slightly under her breath so her sisters couldn't hear.

Falconheart looked down at her, slightly confused. "Of course I do, Sedgepaw." Falconheart assured her.

"I wonder if I'm not mature enough, when I was jumping around with Dovepaw and Petalpaw I kind of felt like a kit, or a new apprentice."

Falconheart rested his tail on her shoulders, he felt Sedgepaw's body stiffen slightly but he couldn't tell why. "Sedgepaw, it's okay to be excited. Just because you're a warrior doesn't mean you have to be all serious all the time. Enjoy your ceremony and be excited about it."

Falconheart hadn't shared the same excitement about his own warrior ceremony, but perhaps that had been since he had been alone. Or that Falconclaw had taught him not to act like a kit. Part of Falconheart wished that his warrior ceremony had been a little different. *I can't think like that.* Falconheart thought, shaking his head slightly. *I'm happy that I became a warrior, and I wouldn't change anything.* He glanced towards the medicine cat den where Honeyfrost was talking with Pebblestep. *Still...*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather around the Sunstone for a Clan meeting!" Dawnstar's call rang out from the top of the Sunstone, pulling Falconheart's thoughts back to the forest. "It's time." Falconheart mewed to Sedgepaw and nudged her forward. Sedgepaw, Dovepaw and Petalpaw hurried over to the Sunstone where Dawnstar and Cinderflame sat.

Sedgepaw cast a small, grateful glance over her shoulder that made Falconheart feel a little warmer inside. He stood up and padded over to where the Clan was gathering. He noticed Icepetal and Adderstrike sitting close together, their tails intertwined as they watched their daughters become warriors.

"I've called the Clan today because three mentors have told me that their apprentices are ready to become warriors. Applespots, Turtleblaze and Fawnheart is this true?"

"It is, Dawnstar." Applespots mewed. "Dovepaw is a confident, skilled and talented young she-cat who I believe will make an incredible warrior."

"I believe the same for Petalpaw," Turtleblaze stepped forward. "She's shy and quiet, but once she's out there in the forest hunting or even fighting she is incredibly skilled."

"As is Sedgepaw," Fawnheart continued. "She's brave, fierce and talented in both hunting and fighting. She is more than ready to become a warrior."

"Then I believe it is time." Dawnstar purred and jumped down, facing the three apprentices who trembled with excitement. "I, Dawnstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained long and hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Falconheart watched Sedgepaw with a strong surge of admiration, even though Petalpaw and Dovepaw were snickering with excitement, she held her head high and stable.

"Sedgepaw, Dovepaw and Petalpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Dovepaw's voice was high and cheerful, yet confident.

"I do." Pebblepaw's voice was quiet, but Falconheart could tell she was ready.

"I do." Sedgepaw spoke boldly and confidently. *She's definitely ready.*

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names!

Dovepaw, from this day forward you will be known as Dovepool. SunClan honors your confidence and skill as a warrior." Dovepool stepped forward and Dawnstar touched her muzzle to Dovepool's forehead and Dovepool licked her shoulder. Dovepool stepped back and Dawnstar continued. "Petalpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Petalbreeze. SunClan honors your intelligence and kindness." Petalbreeze and Dawnstar repeated what they did with Dovepool. Finally, it was Sedgepaw's turn. "Sedgepaw, from this day forward you will be known as Sedgefern, SunClan honors your bravery and loyalty."

Falconheart watched the newly named Sedgefern licked Dawnstar's shoulder. "SunClan welcomes you all as full warriors of SunClan!"

"Dovepool! Petalbreeze! Sedgefern!" The Clan cheered, Falconheart wanted to make sure Sedgefern heard him loud and clear. He watched the three newly named warriors run to their family and celebrate their brand new status as warriors. Falconheart let out a purr, the first warrior ceremony in their new home. *We really do belong here.*

Chapter 2

"Chamomile, marigold, feverfew, borage..." Honeyfrost ran through each of the herbs that she and Pebblestep had neatly stacked in their herb store. It was such a refreshing sight to see the medicine cat den stocked full of herbs. Newleaf had arrived and the Clans had spent two moons adjusting to their new territories and making them home. Honeyfrost and Pebblestep had their den nice and organized, Honeyfrost loved living here.

"Pebblestep is out getting some nettle." Honeyfrost mewed to herself. "We should be fine, but I'm going to take some feverfew to the elders." She grabbed a bundle of it, knowing that Snakewhisker would need it but she wasn't sure about the others.

She trotted over to the elder's den, resting beside the nursery. She poked her head in and found Rainears and Crowfur in deep conversation while Sandfoot was resting quietly and Snakewhisker was grooming his fur.

"Hello." Honeyfrost purred through her herbs, stepping into the den. She set down the herbs and looked over the four elders.

"Hello there, Honeyfrost." Rainears purred, looking up from her conversation from Crowfur. "How is everything?"

"Good." Honeyfrost replied cheerfully. "Just coming in to check on you, brought some feverfew in case you have any aches." She moved over to Snakewhisker. "Mostly for you, how is your leg?"

"Stiff as always." Snakewhisker gave his leg a sniff. "But it only hurts when I wake up in the morning."

"Well, take this." Honeyfrost set down the feverfew and Snakewhisker ate up the herbs without complained. Honeyfrost turned to the other elders. When Honeyfrost was a kit she thought Sandfoot was so young, but the colors in her fur were starting to dull and she had gray fur laced in them.

Rainears and Crowfur were also starting to show age in their formerly jet black fur. Sandfoot was older than them, but Rainears and Crowfur weren't too much younger than her. Honeyfrost wondered if Applespots would retire soon as well, she didn't look as old as Sandfoot but they were the same age.

"How are the rest of you feeling?" Honeyfrost asked, her eyes going to Sandfoot's shoulder. The old wound she got from the battle against Thornstar had left a nasty scar which prevented her from continuing her life as a warrior.

"My shoulder aches a little." Sandfoot explained. "I wouldn't mind some feverfew." Honeyfrost set down the feverfew in front of Sandfoot and turned her attention once more to Rainears and Crowfur.

"And how are you?"

"I'm fine, a little hungry though."

"I can have Hollypaw or Burnpaw bring you some prey if they're back, if not I can bring you some." Honeyfrost offered.

"There's no need for that, Honeyfrost." Crowfur stopped her. "We're not *that* old."

"Oh, I know." Honeyfrost assured them. "But you're an elder, it's an apprentice's job to bring you prey and your job tor rest and teach them your wisdom."

"I don't know how much wisdom I have to teach." Crowfur laughed. "I still don't *feel* like an elder. When we were apprentices the only elder we had was Fishtail. She didn't have much wisdom to offer other than her sharp tongue."

"I don't know," Snakewhisker added. "She was my grandmother and she had quite a lot to say once you got her talking." As Snakewhisker spoke, his voice became raspy and he let out a dry cough.

"Are you okay?" Honeyfrost stepped towards Snakewhisker, he didn't look sick but that cough was obvious.

Snakewhisker nodded. "Yeah," He cleared his throat. "Ever since I had greencough I've had a bit of a dry throat, but I feel fine."

Honeyfrost thought for a moment, wondering why a cough would stick around for so long, and wondering even more why he hadn't told her. "I'll bring you some tansy, that should help."

"It's not a big deal, Honeyfrost." Snakewhisker spoke up. "I cough maybe once or twice a day."

"Still," Honeyfrost turned around, sweeping up the rest of her feverfew. "I don't want it turning into anything nasty, and I'll feel better about it."

"Well," Snakewhisker yawned. "If it makes you feel better then I'll take it. I don't feel so guilty taking herbs now that we're in a forest where they grow."

Feeling more confident, Honeyfrost turned away with a purr and quickly returned to her den and picked up some tansy for Snakewhisker. After bringing him the herb she looked around camp, wondering what she could do to keep her paws busy. Cherryleaf and her kits were doing just fine, the elders had been attended to and no other cats needed medical help.

All wounds from the journey had healed nicely and there had been no battles as the Clans adjusted to their new homes. Honeyfrost spotted movement as Hollypaw, Burnpaw, Rosewind and Cloudspots entered through the bramble barrier. Each of the apprentices held several pieces of prey.

Honeyfrost quickly padded up to them, getting their attention. "Hey there, Honeyfrost!" Hollypaw greeted cheerfully. "Need something?"

"If you two don't have anything planned would you mind taking some prey to the elders and Cherryleaf?"

"Do we have something planned?" Burnpaw looked at Cloudspots hopefully, Honeyfrost withheld a laugh, she couldn't understand why it was such a chore to bring prey to the elders.

"I *could* make you check them for ticks." Honeyfrost teased with a

flick of her tail.

"We'll take them prey." Hollypaw stepped in before Burnpaw could say anything else. "You can take the prey to Cherryleaf and Squirreltail, I'll take it to the elders, okay?"

"Okay." Burnpaw replied, looking at Cloudspots. "I'll be right back."

"There's no hurry, we might do some battle training later but don't feel rushed." Cloudspots explained with a glance casted at Rosewind.

Honeyfrost watched the two apprentices rush to the fresh-kill pile and take prey to the two different dens. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything." Honeyfrost apologized to Cloudspots and Rosewind.

"Of course you didn't, Honeyfrost." Rosewind assured her. "We just got done with hunting, you're not interrupting anything."

"Good." Honeyfrost dipped her head and walked back to the medicine cat den. Pebblestep hadn't returned yet, so Honeyfrost spent her time tidying up the den for when she did return.

Once Honeyfrost was finished, she ran over the herbs against to test herself. She did this until Pebblestep finally returned with a jawful of nettle. "It looks nice in here." Pebblestep mewed, setting down the nettle in their herb store.

"Thank you." Honeyfrost mewed and sat down in her nest, washing her paws. "I gave Snakewhisker and Sandfoot some feverfew, and Snakewhisker said he still has a cough so I gave him some tansy."

"He still has a cough from when he had greencough?" Pebblestep inquired, her blue eyes twinging with confusion. "That's odd."

"He said it doesn't happen often, but the tansy should help it." Honeyfrost explained. "I'll take some more to him tomorrow."

"Sounds like a plan," Pebblestep turned her head into the herb store. "Ask him if his throats hurt, and if it does then I'll go get him some honey, there's a bee hive near the collapsed badger den."

"Alright." Honeyfrost nodded and continued to work throughout the day. As the day went on, the two medicine cats didn't have much to do. Honeyfrost had gotten so used to everything being so chaotic that without her Clan constantly needing herbs, she wasn't sure what to do with herself.

Soon, the night came and SunClan settled down. Almost all of SunClan were sleeping soundly in their dens, with the exception of two cats, Yarrowtail and Honeyfrost. She laid in her nest, pretending to be asleep until she was certain that Pebblestep was sound asleep. She lifted her head and quietly stepped out of her nest.

Honeyfrost looked around, spotting Yarrowtail sitting in front of the bramble entrance to camp. His eyes were focused intently on on the entrance, Honeyfrost wouldn't be able to get past him without drawing attention to herself. She turned around, jumping up onto a ledge that jutted out of the stone wall.

From there she put her paw on another smaller ledge near the top and hoisted herself up and over the edge of the hollow and onto the grass. She looked into the hollow to make sure that Yarrowtail hadn't spotted her and continued on her way.

Honeyfrost walked away from the camp, around the edge of it and towards the river. She heard the rushing sound of the water through the trees and spotted the sparkling water. She walked along the riverbank until she reached the border that lead to the gathering hollow.

She crossed the stepping stones, glancing over at AshClan territory for a brief moment. Every pawstep closer made her heart race and her stomach do flips. She knew that she shouldn't be doing this, she knew that it was wrong but Honeyfrost couldn't stop herself.

She crossed the river and hurried into the gathering area, having to stop herself from sprinting there. It didn't take long before Honeyfrost reached the five trees and spotted Blackstorm's jet black pelt through the trees, the moon shining down on him and turning it silver.

He turned to look at her, his icy blue eyes meeting her green eyes, as soon as they locked gazes, Honeyfrost felt her heart skip a bit. She lifted her head and attempted to walk confidently over to him, but she couldn't stop the fluttering feeling in her heart and belly. "Hi." Honeyfrost asked, her voice trembling with excitement.

Blackstorm approached her, touching his muzzle to hers. Electricity shot through her body, making her tense and feel relaxed all at the same time. "Hi." Blackstorm mewed, almost in a whisper. "I'm glad you could make it again."

"Me too." Honeyfrost purred, nuzzling him in return. Ever since the journey had ended, Honeyfrost and Blackstorm had found themselves longing to see each other. She had missed being able to sleep beside him, she missed being able to talk with and see him everyday. After about half a moon of not seeing each other except for at the half-moon, but it wasn't enough.

After a conversation, they had decided to continue their nightly meetings they had started in the old forest and had met together almost every single night since. When they had first started, Honeyfrost had told herself over and over that it was fine because they were just friends, but they were well past that. Neither of them could deny that they were much closer than friends.

"How was your day?" Blackstorm mewed, stepping back from her and sitting down, resting his tail across her shoulders.

"Good," Honeyfrost replied. "Just did basic medicine cat things." She shrugged. "How about you?"

"Haresong twisted her paw while hunting, but that's about it. Tomorrow is Rabbitpaw, Dustpaw and Leafpaw's warrior ceremony."

"That's exciting." Honeyfrost stared at her paws.

"After two moons all we can talk about is Clan life." Blackstorm chuckled, confusing Honeyfrost.

"Is that a problem?" She questioned, tilting her head to side slightly.

"No, it's just-- I don't know why we can't talk about anything else. I watch Ashblaze and Silvermoon, or Puddleclaw and Stormheart talking and it's different. They feel comfortable around each other, are we not comfortable around each other."

"Of course we are." Honeyfrost tried assuring him, but she had noticed the same thing. "But maybe it's...well," Honeyfrost struggled to find the words that were in her head. "Maybe it's because we know that we're not supposed to be doing this." She said under her breath.

Blackstorm was silent for a long time, making Honeyfrost paranoid that she had upset him. "I know, it's wrong but.." Blackstorm lifted his head to look at her. "It doesn't feel wrong, does it?"

Honeyfrost shook her head. "Sometimes I feel the most free around you." She turned away, looking up at the stars, wishing they would tell her what to do. "But if anyone found out, if Pebblestep or my mother found out they would be so disappointed."

"Tell me about it," Blackstorm sighed. "My mother--Echoheart, isn't around. I don't know where she is." He stared at his paws. "But Riverstar, she would hate me...and so would Skyfeather."

"I wish it didn't have to be that way." Honeyfrost mewed, pressing up against him. She enjoyed his warmth on the chilly newleaf night. "Sometimes I wish I could be with you without fear of being caught, but that would require us not being medicine cats and us being in the same Clan." She sighed heavily, she had thought about leaving SunClan, stepping down from her position as a medicine cat and going to be with Blackstorm but she couldn't see herself doing that. *I'm meant to be a medicine cat, but it also feels like I'm meant to be with Blackstorm...*

"Don't focus too hard on it." Blackstorm touched his muzzle to her cheek. "Let's just focus on tonight, we'll worry about tomorrow when it comes." Honeyfrost closed her eyes, focusing on his words, his scent and his voice. *Just focus on tonight...*

Chapter 3

Blackstorm hesitated, glancing over his shoulder one last time as Honeyfrost vanished into the trees of SunClan territory. His heart ached as he watched her go, he would now have to return to his life in AshClan, without her by his side. It was time to return to menial tasks of gathering herbs, counting herbs and taking prey to the kits. Blackstorm was grateful that the Clans were at peace, but he felt a forever creeping sense of uselessness.

With a heavy sigh, Blackstorm padded back into AshClan territory, breathing in the calming scent of pine trees. It was quite the walk from here to his camp which was on the entire side of the territory. He walked slowly, despite his fear of being caught by Skyfeather. Part of him wanted to be caught, maybe then he could find a way to be with Honeyfrost, but then he would be putting her at risk as well. He never should've started seeing Honeyfrost, but now he couldn't stop, and he didn't want to.

Blackstorm finally reached camp at the peak of dawn, he avoided Harewhisker who was standing guard by going around a side entrance of the camp, pushing his way through a hole in the thorn barrier around the camp and stepping into his den. Skyfeather was still sound asleep. Blackstorm fell into his nest, feeling exhausted. He was sacrificing sleep for Honeyfrost, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

Blackstorm's eyes fluttered open, he winced as the rays of the sun shone directly onto his face. He lifted his head, letting out a long yawn. He looked around the medicine cat den, Skyfeather wasn't in his nest and there wasn't any trace of him in the den. Blackstorm stood up and stretched out his limbs. He peered out of the entrance of the medicine cat den, it was sunhigh already, Blackstom didn't realize he had fallen asleep. Why didn't Skyfeather wake him up?

Blackstorm stepped out of the den, looking around camp. Rabbitpaw, Dustpaw, Leafpaw and Primrosepaw were all sitting with their mentors. He knew that today was their warrior

assessment, though he didn't really care. Maybe he should care more about what was going on his Clan, but new warriors were made all the time. Primrosepaw was a former rogue, daughter of the horrible cat Hornet who threatened to kill Honeyfrost. Blackstorm of all cats knew he shouldn't judge her based on her parents, but he couldn't help but feel a sharp pang of distrust towards the she-cat, but his Clan had welcomed her and he ignored his own feelings.

"There you are, Blackstorm." Blackstorm's ears twitched as he heard the voice of his mentor. He looked over his shoulder, spotting Skyfeather coming from the elder's den. "Glad you're awake."

"You could've woken me up soon, you know." Blackstorm reminded him.

"I tried to." Skyfeather replied, he didn't sound annoyed but Blackstorm's pelt still burned. "But, you seemed really tired so I let you sleep." Skyfeather's blue eyes looked around camp for just a moment before focusing back on Blackstorm. "We're going to LichenClan camp."

Blackstorm tilted his head, what possible reason did the two of them have to go to LichenClan? "Why?" Blackstorm questioned.

"I want to explore the unclaimed territory for herbs, mainly for wintergreen. I found some nightshade near the river. I got rid of it, but you never know where more could be. We don't have any wintergreen near our territory but the other might. I don't want some mousebrained apprentice eating some nightshade and not have any way to save him."

"Okay, but I still don't see why we need to speak with LichenClan about it."

Skyfeather twitched his nose, was Blackstorm annoying him? "Because I want passage through their territory. Even if we were to go directly through the gathering hollow the only crossing for the river is into LichenClan territory. I spoke with Riverstar and she said we could."

"Alright." Blackstorm nodded. "Are we leaving now?"

Skyfeather nodded. "I want to make it back before nightfall if possible." With that, the two medicine cats padded out of AshClan camp. When they had first found the camp it was just a stone outcropping with the means to make dens, but in their time living here, the Clan had formed a large bramble barrier around the edge of it. It took a while, but it finally felt like a home.

The two of them moved through the pine trees quickly, they weren't too far from the "border." AshClan only neighbor was SunClan, on the other side of the territory was a small part of forest that was different from AshClan's pines. This territory had been debated being owned by AshClan or LichenClan, but for now it remained unclaimed territory as this part of the forest lead up into the mountains and to the Spirit Garden.

Skyfeather veered away from the mountains and towards the gathering hollow. "We'll cross the river and wait for a patrol to find us. Medicine cats or not we shouldn't go marching into other territories right now, it shows respect to the other Clans."

Blackstorm didn't reply, he just nodded along and followed Skyfeather. They soon reached the gathering hollow and Blackstorm felt his heart ache. He would be back here tonight with Honeyfrost, he wished he didn't have to make such a long journey but it was worth it for her.

The river appeared over the small hill and Blackstorm and Skyfeather approaching the slow moving water. Blackstorm looked at the sparkling water, nerves creeping up his spine. He hated water, and crossing the river would never get easier for him, he was glad that they no longer had to cross a river to reach the gathering hollow.

"Be careful." Skyfeather advised as he jumped onto the thick log that crossed the river. He walked across with ease and landed on the rocky banks on the other side. Blackstorm followed his mentor, leaping up onto the log and forcing himself not to stare down at the water below. He hoped that Skyfeather couldn't hear his racing heartbeat.

Luckily, Blackstorm reached the other side and jumped down into the stone. "We'll wait here." Skyfeather mewed and sat down. After a few moments of silence, Skyfeather spoke up. "So what's been keeping you up so much lately? I notice you've been sleeping in more and more."

Blackstorm tensed, he could sense Skyfeather looking at him but Blackstorm refused to meet his gaze. Instead, he just shrugged. "Trouble sleeping, and staying asleep I guess. Been like that ever since we reached the new territory, I'm probably still adjusting."

Skyfeather made a small noise of acknowledgement. "Well, maybe you should take some poppy seeds tonight so you can get a full night's rest."

"That's not necessary, I'll be okay." Blackstorm finally looked at Skyfeather. "I'll get over it."

"Well I can't have you sleeping until sunhigh everyday. You're a full medicine cat now, you have responsibilities. I took an apprentice so I wouldn't have to deal with the brunt of everything myself, you can't do much healing when you're sleeping the day away." Blackstorm winced at Skyfeather's sharp tone. *So he really was annoyed.*

"I'll be better about waking up earlier, I promise." Blackstorm flattened his ears, turning his gaze to his paws. He nudged a smooth brown stone, wishing the conversation to be over. *I'm forgetting my responsibilities, throwing them away for Honeyfrost. I can't do that.* His heart twisted at the thought.

Voices began passing through the trees and Skyfeather stood up. "That should be a patrol." He mewed, squinting to see through the thick trees. Blackstorm stood up as well, waiting for the LichenClan cats to arrive.

Eventually the cats broke through the trees, at the head of the patrol was Rowanwhisker followed by Briarpaw, Foxtail, Rowanwhisker and Flowerheart. "Greetings." Skyfeather called out to the patrol, getting their attention. Rowanwhisker came to a stop and lead her patrol over to the two medicine cats.

"Hello, Skyfeather, Blackstorm. What brings you to LichenClan territory?" Her eyes were mildly suspicious, but not hostile. *Honestly, what harm could two medicine cats bring.* Blackstorm flicked his tail but held his tongue.

"I would like to speak with Timberstar and Roseheart." Skyfeather explained. "It won't take very long."

"Alright," Rowanwhisker nodded. "We'll escort you to our camp."

"Thank you very much." Skyfeather mewed gratefully and he and Blackstorm began following the patrol. They weren't very deep into LichenClan territory when Briarpaw bounded up to Blackstorm. She was a very young apprentice, leaving the nursery less than a moon ago. She still looked a kit with bright eyes and fluffy fur.

"So," The apprentice began. "What do you do as a medicine cat?"

Blackstorm gave the apprentice a quizzical look. "You never thought to ask your own medicine cat that?"

Briarpaw shrugged. "Roseheart is always busy, I know you heal and stuff and talk with StarClan, but what do you do when you're not doing that?"

"We gather herbs, check on our Clanmates and make sure that everyone is healthy. Right now, things are pretty peaceful so we don't have much to do, but sometimes an apprentice will step on a thorn, or an elder will have aching joints so we almost always have something to do."

"Ohhh." Briarpaw looked at Blackstorm with interest. "Because I think Emberkit wants to be a medicine cat, she's really young but she's always wandering off to Roseheart's den."

"Maybe she does." Blackstorm recalled when he was a kit, his memories started after Skyfeather stepped up to be a medicine cat, and he was always drawn to the scent of herbs. When Nightheart wrenched her claw while they were playing one day and went to Skyfeather.

Blackstorm had been inside the medicine cat den for the first time

that day and it changed his world. He watched Skyfeather treat Nightheart and he wanted to do it do, he wanted to help. He knew from that day on that he wanted to be a medicine cat. Blackstorm genuinely loved what he did, he loved healing and having such a close connection with StarClan. *And I'm breaking the medicine cat code.* Blackstorm thought with a painful tear in his heart.

Blackstorm was grateful when they reached LichenClan camp and he could pull his mind away from his own thoughts. The LichenClan camp was on a large plateau with a thorn barrier around the edges. There was one tree in the back of the camp that stood taller than the rest, the roots twisted away and revealed that the tree itself was hollow inside.

"That's Timberstar's den, follow me." Rowanwhisker dismissed the rest of her patrol and guided the AshClan medicine cats to the large tree. The entrance was covered by a large, flowering shrub.

"Timberstar?" Rowanwhisker called into the den. "You have visitors, may I come in."

A chuckle came from inside the den. "You don't have to ask, Rowanwhisker. You're my friend come on in." Rowanwhisker purred and pushed her way through the brush while Blackstorm and Skyfeather did the same.

Inside the den was Timberstar eating a squirrel, he looked up with confusion passing over his gaze as he looked at Skyfeather and Blackstorm. "Hello there." Timberstar mewed, swallowing a piece of prey. "What can I do for you?"

"I discovered some nightshade in our territory and we do not have much yarrow growing around, so I was wondering if we could have passage through your territory to search the unclaimed territory beside yours for wintergreen. I don't want an apprentice accidently eating any toxic herbs and not have a way to treat them."

Timberstar thought for just a moment. "I don't see why not, I'd prefer it if you stuck to the river while you traveled. I trust you two, but it may but my Clanmate's at ease."

"Of course." Skyfeather dipped his head. "Blackstorm and I will be the only ones travelling there. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure." Timberstar nodded. "I'm always happy to help." Blackstorm looked at Timberstar and thought of Jaggedstar, the former LichenClan leader was just as kind, LichenClan were a peaceful Clan and Blackstorm appreciated that. *Now that I think about it, the only violent Clan around here is us.* Blackstorm twitched his ears.

"Why don't you stop by and say hello to Roseheart while you're here, I will find a cat to escort you back to your territory."

"Thank you, Timberstar." Skyfeather mewed. "I think we will go say hi to Roseheart." The four cats turned out of Timberstar's den and back into LichenClan camp. Rowanwhisker guided them to Roseheart's den which was made out of two boulders.

Skyfeather and Blackstorm stepped inside. "Hello." Skyfeather called in, getting Roseheart's attention. Blackstorm was surprised to see that Roseheart wasn't alone, at her paws was a little bright ginger get playing with a torn up oak leaf. *That must be Emberkit.*

"Oh," Roseheart was slightly taken aback. "I wasn't expecting you two, is everything okay?" Skyfeather nodded and explained what they had told Timberstar. "Well that's good." Roseheart mewed, stacking up a pile of moss balls. Blackstorm admired how neat her den was. *And she does this all on her own.* "I haven't found any poisonous herbs but I'm sure they're around, I'll have to keep an extra close eye out."

"Who is this?" Skyfeather motioned towards Emberkit, the small kit was staring at the two medicine cats with huge green eyes.

"This is Emberkit." Roseheart purred. "My little "helper."" She chuckled. "Though she mostly helps by keeping me entertained for now."

"I'm gonna learn all of the herbs!" Emberkit jumped up, trotting in proud circles around Roseheart's legs. See this," Emberkit ran behind Roseheart and dragged out an ivy leaf. "This is a borage

leaf!"

"Close," Roseheart mewed. "That's an ivy leaf, we use them to store herbs. Borage is used to help queens produce milk so they can feed kits."

"Oh," Emberkit dropped the leaf and stared at it intently for a long while.

"Looks like you already have an apprentice, four moons before she's ready." Skyfeather purred with amusement.

"She's fun to have around." Roseheart purred, giving Emberkit a small ball of moss to play with. "It gets lonely in my den, ever since Barkclaw died I haven't had anyone to spend a lot of time with who wasn't sick or injured. Emberkit keeps me entertained, but I'm sure when she's ready to become an apprentice she'll join me in here."

"That would be nice." Skyfeather purred, watching Emberkit play. "Having a new apprentice is fun, I remember when Blackstorm first became my apprentice. He was very dedicated." Skyfeather cast a glance at Blackstorm that made him feel awkward, his belt burned and he looked away. "Well, we should be going." Skyfeather mewed. "It was nice to see you again Roseheart."

"You too." Roseheart purred and watched the two of them leave.

"Bye bye!" Emberkit called out from behind them, Blackstorm couldn't help but appreciate the small kit. She would be a great medicine cat, he could already tell. As they left LichenClan camp, Blackstorm couldn't help but wonder if *he* was a good medicine cat.

Chapter 4

"Are you ready? This is your big day!" Nightheart exclaimed, purring at Rabbitpaw. "Your warrior assessment!"

"I'm aware of what day it is." Rabbitpaw laughed, flicking Nightheart's ear with her tail. "And yes I'm ready, but you telling me how important of a day it is is making me nervous."

"Sorry." Nightheart replied sheepishly. "I'm just excited, it's been harder to hang out since I became a warrior. I'm just excited that we'll get to do more together once you pass!"

"*If* I pass." Rabbitpaw reminded her, Nightheart could see a familiar doubt in the apprentice's green eyes.

"*When* you pass." Nightheart corrected her. "You're a very sharp hunter, you're small and quick. You'll do just fine, I promise." Nightheart looked at Rabbitpaw with admiration, she didn't look like an apprentice anymore. She was still small, but she was lean and slender. Her pelt was soft and silky and her green eyes as bright as ever.

Rabbitpaw had grown more confident lately, but she still struggled with slight anxiety issues from time to time, and today would be a stressful day for any cat. "I wish Timberpaw could be here." Rabbitpaw sighed, thinking of her brother, taken too soon by greencough on the journey.

"He *is* here." Nightheart brushed her tail along Rabbitpaw's pelt. "He's watching over all of you and guiding you, and he'll be there to see you become a warrior." Rabbitpaw looked up at Nightheart with gratitude burning in her eyes.

"Rabbitpaw!" Stormheart called for his apprentice, the gray tom was standing with Dustpaw, Leafpaw, Primrosepaw and all of their mentors. Rabbitpaw took a deep breath and bounded over to her mentor and siblings.

"Good luck!" Nightheart called after her, Rabbitpaw gave a cheerful glance over her shoulder and the group of cats vanished into the territory. Nightheart wished she could assist Rabbitpaw in some way, she had been helping with her training all the time now. Stormheart was a good mentor, but Rabbitpaw needed a little extra help with certain things, and Nightheart was happy to help. She was at her happiest when she was with Rabbitpaw.

Nightheart's paws itched to do something now, she hated not having any work to do. She trotted across camp to where Ashblaze was organizing patrols. She stepped in beside Lilyclaw and Harewhisker. AshClan camp was pretty empty since four cats were gone with their apprentices. It made Nightheart sad, seeing how small of a Clan that AshClan was.

Once Rabbitpaw and the others were made warriors, they wouldn't have any apprentices other than Blackstorm for another two moons when Sagekit and Hailkit would become apprentices. Silvermoon's kits were only two moons old, so it would be a while before they were apprentices.

"Since this is all we have right now," Ashblaze mewed while looking over the available cats. "We'll just head over and patrol the SunClan border. Let's go, I don't want to leave the camp empty for too long."

Ashblaze quickly took the lead and led the small patrol consisting of Nightheart, Lilyclaw, Harewhisker, and Ravensong out of AshClan camp. Nightheart felt confident navigating their new territory, it didn't long for her learn the paths and where everything was. She loved their new territory, the smell of the pines was heavenly and the trees towered protectively over head.

The AshClan patrol easily jumped the small stream and soon reached the SunClan border. Nightheart couldn't help but admit that it had been difficult adjusting to life without the other Clans around, but Nightheart liked it better this way. She was grateful that she was away from Falconheart and that Blackstorm was away from Honeyfrost. She didn't know if he was sneaking out to see her or not, but she hated the idea of it. She knew that only part of the blame could be placed on Honeyfrost, Blackstorm was willing getting involved with another medicine cat, Nightheart hated how

disloyal her brother was being.

But am I so much better than him? Nightheart thought, thinking of her training alongside Thornstar. *He's hated by AshClan, and I'm letting him train me in secrecy.* Nightheart shook her head. *It's completely different! Plus...* Nightheart flicked her tail. *Falconheart is being trained by him too.* She snorted. *It's so strange how my brother and I ended up so much like Falconheart and Honeyfrost.*

The patrol went smoothly, no issues or anything out of the ordinary and they returned to camp. Nightheart instantly noticed that Rabbitpaw and the others had returned from their assessment, all the apprentices seemed incredibly excited. *They passed!* Nightheart thought with glee. Once Ashblaze dismissed the patrol, Nightheart hurried up to the small apprentice. "So how did it go?" She asked once she was close enough.

"We all passed!" Rabbitpaw purred. "I'm so relieved." She sighed happily. "But I'm still a little nervous."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highstone for a Clan meeting!" Riverstar's call rang out over the camp, beside Nightheart, Rabbitpaw tensed up. She could tell that her friend was beginning to panic.

Nightheart rested her tail across Rabbitpaw's shoulders. "You're going to do just fine." She said quietly into Rabbitpaw's ear. "You're going to be an incredibly warrior." Rabbitpaw just nodded, taking a cautious step forward. Nightheart sat down, watching Rabbitpaw approach the Highstone along with her siblings and Primrosepaw.

Riverstar held her head high, deep blue eyes sparkling with pride. *She loves naming new warriors.* Nightheart thought, new warriors was always a wonderful thing for the Clan. "I've gathered the Clan today because we have four apprentices who have passed their warrior assessments and are now ready to receive their warrior names." Cheers spread throughout the Clan. "One of these apprentices wasn't born in our Clan," Her eyes rested on Primrosepaw. "But I believe that she has done more than prove herself."

Primrosepaw held her head high, the former rogue had truly proven herself. Nightheart would be proud to call her a fellow warrior. "I, Riverstar, leader of AshClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices, for they have trained long and hard to understand the ways of your noble, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Riverstar jumped down from the Highstone to face the apprentices.

"Dustpaw, Leafpaw, Rabbitpaw and Primrosepaw. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend the Clan even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do." Dustpaw held his head high.

"I do." Leafpaw gave a small nod.

"I do." Rabbitpaw's voice trembled, but Nightheart could see the passion in her eyes.

"I do." Primrosepaw's voice rang out above all others.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names! Dustpaw, from this day forward until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Dustfall. AshClan honors your strength and bravery." Dustfall stepped forward and licked Riverstar's shoulder and the leader touched her muzzle to his forehead. He stepped back and the ceremony continued. "Leafpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Leafdawn, AshClan honors your intelligence and hunting skill." Leafdawn repeated what Dustfall had done. "Rabbitpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Rabbitspring, AshClan honors your kindness and generosity. Finally, Primrosepaw you will be known as Primroseheart. AshClan honors your bravery and dedication. We welcome you all as full warriors of AshClan!"

"Dustfall! Leafdawn! Rabbitspring! Primroseheart!" The cats of AshClan cheered their brand new warriors, Nightheart made sure that Rabbitspring could hear her voice loud and clear. She wanted the new warrior to know just how proud she was.

"Now that we have no more apprentices aside from Blackstorm, I

want all warriors helping out around camp as the apprentices would. I don't care how old you are, you can still help out." With that, Riverstar dipped her head and dismissed the Clan.

Nightheart watched as Haresong swarmed her kits and foster daughter. "I'm so proud of all of you!" Her purr was so loud that Nightheart could hear it from where she sat. "I know that your father is just as proud as I am! And so is your mother, Primroseheart."

"I hope so." Primroseheart chuckled, her green eyes becoming distant. Nightheart blinked, she wondered just how much Primroseheart missed her life as a rogue.

Once Haresong backed off a little, Nightheart padded up to Rabbitspring. "Congratulations." She purred. "You did it, you're a warrior!" She nuzzled Rabbitspring's cheek.

"I couldn't have done it without you." Rabbitspring's eyes were soft and caring, they made Nightheart's heart flutter. "You gave me the confidence to become a better cat, and I am so grateful for that."

Nightheart felt warmth spread throughout her body. "You're so very welcome, Rabbitspring." Saying the she-cat's new name felt right. "And I will still be right here if you ever need anything, if you want me to, that is."
"Of course I do." Rabbitspring nudged her. "Now I just have to worry about my silent vigil." She chuckled.

"Like always, you'll do just fine." Nightheart brushed her pelt against Rabbitspring's. "I believe in you."

Chapter 5

"It sounds really dry." Honeyfrost pointed out as she listened to Snakewhisker's cough. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah," Snakewhisker replied, his voice hoarse and raspy. "I don't know why it suddenly got so bad." He flicked his tail.

"What other symptoms have you been having?" Pebblestep questioned, placing her forepaw on Snakewhisker's pelt. "You feel warm."

"I just kind of feel dizzy." Snakewhisker explained. "I feel hot all the time, and like my head is full of stones."

"It's not greencough." Pebblestep narrowed her eyes. "I'm not quite sure what this is." She sighed and turned away, looking in her herb store. "I'm going to ask the other medicine cats tonight if they have any clue what it may be, for now I want you to stay in the medicine cat den so we don't risk infecting any other cats. I don't know if it is dangerous or not, so I'm going to treat it like it is."

The gray and white medicine cat began making a nest for Snakewhisker. "Hope you like us cause you're stuck in here with us again."

"You two are alright." Snakewhisker teased and sat in his nest. "I don't mind staying in here for a little while more." He curled up in his nest. "I just want to feel better."

"So do I." Pebblestep said quietly from across the den. "Honeyfrost!" She called, and Honeyfrost quickly ran over to her mentor. "I want to give him some catmint as well as coltsfoot with some honey. I don't know if catmint will cure him, but we'll have to try. The coltsfoot should help his breathing and the honey will soothe his throat."

"Alright." Honeyfrost nodded and began quickly gathering the herbs

that Pebblestep had requested. She brought them to Snakewhisker. "Here you go, hopefully this helps."

"I thought I got rid of this stupid cough when I got cured of greencough." Snakewhisker lashed his tail and quickly ate the herbs. "Though it doesn't feel like greencough."

"We'll figure out what it is, Snakewhisker." Honeyfrost promised. "You just focus on resting." She rested her tail on his shoulders and watched the gray tom fall asleep.

"What do you think he's sick with?" Honeyfrost approached Pebblestep. "He said it doesn't feel like greencough."

Pebblestep let out a hefty sigh. "I wish I had a clue, I've seen minor coughs, whitecough and green cough but nothing like this. Hopefully I'll find the answers I need tonight at the Spirit Garden." Pebblestep cleaned up her herbs and turned to Honeyfrost. "Until then could you gather some more coltsfoot? We're running low and I want to keep it handy for Snakewhisker."

"Of course." Honeyfrost dipped her head and left the medicine cat den. She already knew the best place to find coltsfoot, right beside the river near the MoonClan border. Honeyfrost padded across camp, but was stopped by Petalbreeze.

"Hey there, Honeyfrost. Where you off to?" The small she-cat questioned.

"Pebblestep wanted me to collect more coltsfoot." Honeyfrost explained. "You want to come with? I could use someone to talk to."

"I'd love to." Petalbreeze purred. "I don't really get to work with you that much anymore now that I'm warrior."

"What's that like for you so far?" Honeyfrost questioned as the two she-cats left the camp.

"It's amazing." Petalbreeze raved. "I love having freedoms now, I'm not trapped by apprentice duties. I'm allowed to come along with you for example, it feels wonderful."

Honeyfrost chuckled. "Well lucky you. I'll have a mentor for a very long time yet, but I don't mind. I still have freedoms to do what I want. I love serving Pebblestep."

"I know who is *really* excited to finally be in the warriors next den next to a certain tom cat. Sedgefern."

"Oh?" Honeyfrost tilted her head. "Who is the special cat, does she have a crush?"

Petalbreeze laughed jubilantly. "You haven't noticed? She's been mooning over him since she was a kit!" Honeyfrost blinked, still unsure as to who Petalbreeze was talking about. "Oh my goodness you're as blind as he is! It's your brother."

"Oh wow." Honeyfrost's jaw dropped, Sedgefern has a crush on Falconheart? Now that she thought about, she remembered how Sedgefern was always wanting to train with and go on patrol with Falconheart. "I guess I never paid attention, and I'm assuming Falconheart has no clue?"

"Toms never have any clue." Petalbreeze shook her head. "Sedgefern is worried that Falconheart isn't going to ever want a mate."

"I've never really thought about that." Honeyfrost thought. *I guess he really is old enough to start thinking about mates.* An intrusive thought buried its way into Honeyfrost's head. *But you've been thinking about yours since you were an apprentice.* She tensed up, and quickly shoved the thought away. "I don't know if he does or not, he's kind of an airhead when it comes to other's feelings."

"I noticed that." Petalbreeze flicked her tail. "I *just* became a warrior, I'm not going chasing after any toms any time soon. I want to enjoy my free time as an independent she-cat." She held her head high.

The two continued their conversations towards the river, collected the coltsfoot and returned to camp. Honeyfrost had deeply enjoyed the time spent with Petalbreeze and she made a point to spend more time with Petalbreeze, she needed a friend.

Once back in the medicine cat den, Honeyfrost placed the coltsfoot in the herb store and waited for Pebblestep's call to leave for the Spirit Garden. Once Pebblestep had returned from giving Cherryleaf and her kits herbs, they set out of SunClan camp. As they crossed the forest, Honeyfrost noticed how stressed Pebblestep looked. Her eyes were distant, desperately trying to figure out what was wrong with Snakewhisker.

"Pebblestep! Honeyfrost!" Honeyfrost heard a familiar voice, and looked over her shoulder to see Oneflight hurrying towards them. Honeyfrost couldn't see any sign of Ravenheart, her heart twisted with anxiety.

"Hello, Oneflight." Pebblestep greeted. "Where's Ravenheart? I hope nothing has happened to him."

Oneflight shook his head. "No, Ravenheart is doing alright. He's feeling kind of sick lately, he has a fever and a cough so I convinced him to stay home and rest."

"Snakewhisker has the same symptoms, do you know what it is?" Pebblestep questioned urgently. "I am worried about him."

"I don't know what it is, no." Oneflight admitted. "I'm hoping for some answers tonight. Ravenheart doesn't seem to be too sick, but I am worried that it could get worse."

"Then we should hurry to the Spirit Garden," Pebblestep began moving once more. "I wonder if the other Clans have dealt with the same thing." Honeyfrost and Oneflight agreed and hurried towards the AshClan border.

As Honeyfrost neared the border, her heart began racing as it did almost every night. There was big difference in tonight than her other meetings with Blackstorm however. They had to act like they were both just friends, and they weren't breaking any rules. Honeyfrost strained her vision, trying to spot Blackstorm across AshClan territory.

Soon enough, both AshClan medicine cats stepped over the ridge and became visible in the falling sunlight. "Good evening."

Skyfeather called, meeting the other medicine cats as they travelled up the river. Skyfeather's blue eyes looked over the three medicine cats. "Where's Ravenheart?"

"He's a little sick, I told him to stay behind." Oneflight explained once more.

"Have you had any sick cats in AshClan?" Pebblestep questioned. "Snakewhisker and Ravenheart seem to be sick with the same thing, they both have coughs and fevers and Snakewhisker says he feels light headed."

Skyfeather shook his head. "Haven't had any cats report any sickness like that. Are you sure it isn't greencough?"

"Snakewhisker had greencough during the journey, he says that this feels different. I don't what it is."

Skyfeather thought for a long moment. "I'm not sure what it is either, you should ask StarClan tonight. Hopefully they will be able to tell you what it is."

"I hope so." Pebblestep sighed. While they spoke, Honeyfrost met Blackstorm's gaze, she held his icy blue eyes for as long as she could. *I wish we didn't have to hide our feelings.* Honeyfrost thought painfully.

As the medicine cats continued with their trip, Honeyfrost fell in beside Blackstorm as she always did. "How have you been?" She questioned.

"Good." Blackstorm nodded. "Now that Rabbitspring and her littermates are warriors we don't have any apprentices. A lot of the apprentice duties have been shoved onto just me, even though Riverstar said she didn't want that to happen." He shrugged. "But it's not the worst thing, at least I can keep busy."

Honeyfrost didn't know what to say, she didn't know how Blackstorm hid his feelings so well. She could barely speak without saying what was on her mind, which was always him. She looked at the forest floor as they walked. *Why can't I get this stupid knot out of*

my heart. She thought. *I just want to be happy.*

Honeyfrost was unable to keep up of a conversation as they continued, they met with Roseheart who told Pebblestep that LichenClan didn't have any sick cats either, Honeyfrost hoped they would find answers from StarClan.

Once in the Spirit Garden, Honeyfrost breathed in the sweet scent of the flowers and curled up in her usual spot, just beside the star-shaped flower in the center. She closed her eyes and slipped into a deep sleep.

It didn't take long for Honeyfrost to wake up back in the Spirit Garden, but without the other medicine cats. Honeyfrost looked around, she caught a sweet scent; the scent of Honeywing. She hurried out of the den and found the golden medicine cat looking over the territory.

"Honeywing!" She called out to the medicine cat and rushed up to her. "Do you have any idea what Snakewhisker is sick with?"

"That's not what I'm here to talk about, Honeyfrost." Honeywing replied, not turning around. "Poppyfur will be sharing that information with Pebblestep." Honeyfrost's ears dropped slightly, something was off about Honeywing's tone.

"So what are you here to talk to me about?" Honeyfrost questioned.

"Come sit by me, Honeyfrost." Honeywing finally looked at Honeyfrost, her starlit eyes were filled with love and concern. Honeyfrost felt unsure, but she listened to the StarClan cat's request. Honeyfrost sat down beside Honeywing and looked over the edge of the mountain. "What do you see, Honeyfrost?"

"What do I see?" Honeyfrost echoed, and looked over the Clans. She could see the territories, the rivers, the trees. "I see the Clan's home."

"Up here you really can see it all." Honeywing closed her eyes. "It's beautiful, but not quite like the view from StarClan. In StarClan I can see just about everything, I watch the cats I love and care

about. I make sure that all four Clans are thriving and happy. I can see what they're doing, whether that's right or wrong." Honeywing opened her eyes and looked at Honeyfrost, they met green gazes and Honeyfrost immediately realized what Honeywing wanted to talk about.

"So you've seen me and Blackstorm." Honeyfrost said under her breath, turning away from Honeywing.

"I have." Honeywing's response was simple, but she didn't sound mad.

"I-I don't really know what to say." Honeyfrost sighed. "I can't stop thinking about him. He's all that's in my head, and when I'm with him I feel both free and trapped at the same time. I feel free because he believes in me, because he cares about me. I feel trapped because I know that we could never have a future, we could never live together in peace. I'll never be able to be with him, and I *know* that." Honeyfrost felt emotions swarming over her. "I just want to be happy." She dropped her head, feeling defeated.

"You don't sound happy, Honeyfrost." Honeywing pointed out. "You sound like you're in love, and love can hurt more than the deepest wound."

"I know that what we're doing is wrong but...I don't know if I can stop." Honeyfrost finally looked back at Honeywing, and what she saw was the pain and love of a mother.

"I'm not going to tell you what you're doing is right or wrong. I'm simply going to tell you to follow your heart. In the end, no matter what happens, your heart will know the way and the answer you're looking for will be revealed."

Honeyfrost wasn't convinced, her heart was tearing her apart, how could it possibly know the way?

Chapter 6

Falconheart waited patiently near the warriors den, his tail twitching. Cinderflame had assigned him to a patrol along with Rosewind, Dovepool, Brackenpelt and Flashtail and they he hoped that they would be leaving soon. He spotted Dovepool and Rosewind waiting together while Flashtail had a conversation with Heatherflight, the only cat they were waiting on was Brackenpelt.

Falconheart's patience was rapidly turning to impatience, he just wanted to get this patrol started so he could do something useful with his time. Movement near the nursery caught Falconheart's attention and Brackenheart emerged from the den, probably seeing Squirreltail.

The other members of the patrol spotted Brackenheart and quickly gathered together in the center of camp. "Are we all ready to go."

"We've just been waiting on you." Rosewind teased her father.

"Then let's get going." Brackenpelt flicked his tail playfully and the patrol headed for the camp's exit. It was just past sunhigh, and the cool breeze of newleaf ruffled Falconheart's fur. He loved nothing more than be out in the forest, patrolling with his Clanmates.

He didn't engage in the conversations of the patrol, Rosewind and Brackenpelt talked about a large squirrel Larkthorn had caught, while Flashtail told Dovepool a story from his time in the twoleg place. Falconheart idly listened to the conversations, but didn't feel the need to partake.

He instead focused his senses on the forest, listening to the gentle rustle of the leaves and the smell of prey in the distance. He could hear birds flapping their wings, the disturbing of undergrowth as the SunClan patrol passed through the forest. They neared the AshClan border, and he could smell the other Clan very strongly, more so than normal.

Falconheart tensed slightly, squinting through the trees to try and see what was up. Was there an AshClan patrol? Or had they crossed the border? The Clans had kept the peace as far as Falconheart knew, but it wasn't unlike to AshClan to break that peace just so they could have a little fun. *And I'll show them a real fun time if they try anything.* He flexed his claws, and took a quick look at his patrol mates, they had sensed it as well but didn't seem as tense as he did.

Falconheart forced himself to relax, but puffed out his chest as they neared the border. Sure enough, Falconheart spotted an AshClan patrol. It was lead by Riverstar followed by Foxfeather, Stormheart, Lilyclaw and Dustpaw. When the AshClan patrol was in earshot, Brackenpelt called out to them.

"Good afternoon, Riverstar." The warrior dipped his head.

"Afternoon, Brackenpelt." Riverstar nodded her head towards the warrior.

"How are things? Prey running well?" Brackenpelt was being kind and making small talk, something Falconheart didn't really care for, personally.

"Very well." Riverstar replied. "StarClan has blessed our territory this season, we have more prey than we can eat."

"Same goes for SunClan." Brackenpelt replied. "We've been enjoying full bellies, and also a forest full of herbs. This home really is a wonderful place, wouldn't you agree?"

"Hey, Dovepaw!" Dustpaw called over, his eyes glowing with pride. "My siblings and I became warriors! My name is Dustfall now."

"Congratulations!" Dovepool purred. "My sisters and I became warriors too! You can call me Dovepool."

Falconheart knew that during the journey, a lot of the apprentices had formed friendships, but judging by the slightly annoyed look in Riverstar's blue eyes, she didn't really care for that.

"Well," Riverstar said, somewhat sharply. "We should head back to camp. We have a lot to do around the camp. You have a good

evening." With that, the AshClan leader lead her Clanmates away.

"She seems as sour as ever." Dovepool pointed out with a flick of her tail. "With the way she looked at me you'd think I had bitten her ears off!"

"Riverstar is proud." Brackenpelt explained. "She doesn't like the Clans acting friendly with each other, especially her own."

"Proud? Or stubborn and bitter?" Rosewind snorted. "We have peace for the first time in such a long time. It always seems like there's one problem after another."

"That's just how Clan life is." Brackenpelt sighed. "Let's not let Riverstar get under out pelts, we should just enjoy the peace."

The SunClan patrol muttered agreement and continued on with their patrol. Falconheart couldn't help but feel that Riverstar would act out soon, he didn't know if she would be able to live in peace for too long without picking a fight with another Clan, and SunClan were their only neighbors.

The patrol returned to camp just before dusk, and Brackenpelt went to report to Cinderflame and Dawnstar. Meanwhile, Falconheart's stomach growled for food, so he decided to treat himself to a piece of prey. He found a plump squirrel and began to wolf it down.

Falconheart noticed a cat walking towards him and looked up to see Sedgefern, the she-cats eyes lit up brightly. "Hi, Falconheart." She said, sounding somewhat uncomfortable. Falconheart paid it no mind and just gave her a nod.

"Hi, Sedgefern." He mewed after swallowing a piece of prey.

"How was the patrol?" She questioned, sitting down beside him.

"It was alright." Falconheart shrugged. "Ran into Riverstar, she was as sour as ever. Got annoyed with Dovepool and Dustfall being friendly."

"Oh they got their warrior names, that's awesome." Sedgerfern purred. "Too bad about Riverstar though, with the way she acts

you'd think she's an elder."

"She is pretty old." Falconheart pointed out. "If I remember correctly she was born before Flowerstar."

"Oh wow, but I think Shadowstar is even older." Sedgefern pondered. "But you can't really tell, can you? They both look young, maybe that's what being a leader does to you."

Without realizing it, Falconheart slipped into a deep conversation with Sedgerfern about leaders and earning your nine lives. He didn't notice how late it had gotten until he saw the other warriors turning in for the night. *How did I lose track of the time? I'm not usually like that.* Falconheart looked at Sedgefern, maybe he just really enjoyed talking with her.

"We should get some sleep." Falconheart said, stopping the conversation before they lost any more time.

"Yeah." Sedgerfern stood up, her eyes soft. The two warriors headed to the den and found their nests and it wasn't long until Falconheart fell into a relaxing slumber.

Falconheart felt cold, he could smell the rotting plant life of the Dark Forest. He opened his eyes to find himself standing in the heart of the forest, surrounded by the dead trees. He could hear the river trickling from behind him. "Falconclaw?" He called out to his mentor. "Are you there?"

"No," An unfamiliar voice spoke, causing Falconclaw to tense up. A pale brown tabby stepped out of the shadows, he was laced in several scars and had deep amber eyes, he reminded Falconheart of Falconclaw, but he was certainly a different cat. "But I am."

"Who are you?" Falconheart demanded, holding his head high.

"You don't know? I thought you of all cats would know who I am." He sneered. "I am Thornstar."

"Thornstar." Falconheart growled as he heard the name of SunClan's greatest enemy. "You tried to kill my mother, you nearly tore my Clan apart!" He lashed out, but the dark tabby ducked out of the

way.

"That's quite rude, Falconheart." Thornstar lashed his tail. "Falconclaw is a murderer too, and yet you trust him."

"I let Falconclaw *train* me, that doesn't mean I trust him." Falconheart snarled, his claws ripping into the dead forest floor. "And Falconclaw only killed *one* cat, you killed or caused the death of many more."

"One murder or ten and you'll end up here, and you know a thing or two about killing cats, don't you?" Thornstar's eyes flashed and for a moment, Falconheart saw the eyes of the rogue Hornet as he died, killed by Falconheart's own claws.

Falconheart shook his head. "I killed Hornet to protect my sister and he was outside the warrior code."

"Keep telling yourself that, Falconheart." Thornstar sat down, licking his chest. The tom's arrogance sent fury through Falconheart's veins. Without really thinking, Falconheart leapt forward. He grabbed Thornstar by the shoulders and pinned him to the ground, feeling his claws rip into the pale tabby fur.

Thornstar fought back, his claws piercing Falconheart's skin. He hissed in pain and ripped his claws down the tabby's pelt. *I wish I could've done this when you were alive!* Falconheart sank his teeth into Thornstar's shoulder and lifted his body upwards, given Thornstar a little bit of space to move. The tabby tried to get out, but Falconheart used his advantage to flip Thornstar over and toss him across the forest floor.

"I figured such an infamous cat would be a better fighter." Falconheart spat. "Can't handle getting taken by surprise?"

Thornstar stood up, his pelt dripping blood. He let out a laugh. "I saw that attack coming the moment I saw you." He flicked his ears. "It's good to let your opponent think they're tough."

"Please," Falconheart snorted. "You can't even compare to Falconclaw, he actually makes me fear for my life."

"Foolish, kit." Falconheart bared his teeth at the "kit" comment. "Who do you think *killed* Falconclaw?"

Falconheart's eyes widened. "You killed Falconclaw? I thought he was your uncle! How could you do that to your kin!"

"If there's one thing that Falconclaw taught me, it's that blood doesn't matter. It doesn't matter who you share blood with, the only cats who matter are the ones who will do anything for their Clan. Falconclaw killed to keep SunClan's bloodline pure, I killed Falconclaw to keep the peace in SunClan."

"And you killed Sunstream, Tigertail and countless other cats! You tried to kill my mother!" Falconheart lashed his tail, trying to stop himself from ripping into the disgraceful cat.

"I would've killed you too." Thornstar's eyes glowed malevolently.

"I'd like to see you try!" Once again, Falconheart charged forward, but this time Thornstar was aware of the situation. He caught Falconheart mid air and threw him to the ground, Falconheart hissed in pain as his ribcage slammed against the forest floor. Thornstar raked his claws down Falconheart's back, and sank his teeth into the back of Falconheart's neck.

Falconheart felt himself lift off the ground as Thornstar threw him against a tree. Falconheart's spine hit the tree, and pain spread through his entire body. Falconheart hit the ground, his head spinning.

There was a blur of light brown fur and suddenly Thornstar was towering over Falconheart, pinning him to the ground. He met the tom's dark amber eyes as Thornstar pressed his paw down on Falconheart's throat. "Let's see how it long it takes you to wake up." Thornstar sneered, pressing down harder. Falconheart squirmed under Thornstar's grip, desperately trying to catch a breath. "Maybe you'll just die before then." Thornstar's fangs glinted in the dull moonlight.

"That's enough, Thornstar." Thornstar lifted his paw from Falconheart's throat and let the SunClan warrior up. Falconheart sat

up rapidly, gasping for air. His throat hurt, his breathing burned his chest. Falconheart looked to the source of the new voice and saw Falconclaw approaching, there was another cat beside him. Falconheart tried to see who it was, but his vision struggled to focus.

"You showed him quite enough." Falconclaw mewed, Falconheart looked up at his shadowy mentor, still trying to regain his strength.

"What are you doing here? Why is *he* here?" Falconheart questioned Falconclaw, his voice raspy.

"I needed someone to put your ego in check." Falconclaw explained. "And it's time you had a training partner, someone who *isn't* already dead." Falconheart looked past Falconclaw at the cat who he was with. It was a slender black she-cat with white paws and bright yellow eyes.

"Nightheart." Falconheart growled.

Chapter 7

Nightheart's tail twitched anxiously as she waited in the shadowy forest. Her yellow eyes scanned the dark, dying trees for any sign of Thornstar. *Its not like him to keep me waiting.* Nightheart thought, flicking her ears. As she looked over the trees, she couldn't help but think of the old forest. She wondered why it looked like now that the snow was gone. She wondered if it looked like this place with old rotting trees and the smell of dying plants all around.

At long last, Nightheart heard pawsteps in the distance, rustling the dead flora. Nightheart stood up, ready to greet Thornstar. However, the cat that emerged from the shadows wasn't Thornstar. It was a large tabby who looked similar to the former AshClan leader, but had a darker, slightly more golden tabby pelt. He had darker, more intimidating amber eyes and a long, large scar that trailed down the center of his face.

The presence of this cat made Nightheart feel threatened, her pelt stood on end and she unsheathed her claws. "Who are you?" She demanded with a sharp hiss, refusing to show any fear.

"Stand down, Nightheart." The tom spoke, his voice low and threatening. "I bring you no harm." The tom sat down, holding his broad head high. "My name is Falconclaw, I am Thornstar's uncle."

"Falconclaw?" Nightheart narrowed her eyes, she had never heard of a cat named Falconclaw, only Falconheart. "What do you want? Why should I care that you're Thornstar's uncle."

"Because," Falconclaw began. "I'm the one who told Thornstar to start training you. I have an apprentice of my own, and I decided it was time for you two to meet."

Nightheart's ears flattened, if this cat was in the same forest as Thornstar, then he probably wasn't that great of a cat. Who could he be training? It didn't take long for her to figure it out, Thornstar was training Nightheart because he had told her she was almost like

kin to him. "It's Falconheart, isn't it?" She growled. "I'm not interested, I already know him and I have no intentions of spending any time with him."

Falconclaw let out a deep chuckle. "I can see why, Falconheart can be quite arrogant at times but in here, he's very different. He knows that he's not the biggest cat around here. I think you'd quite enjoy seeing him humbled."

"Oh really?" Nightheart's interest was piqued. "I don't know if I should trust you but..." Her voice trailed off as she stood up. "I guess it couldn't hurt." Nightheart hoped that she wouldn't regret her words.

"So why did you tell Thornstar to train me?" Nightheart questioned Falconclaw as they walked through the forest. "You're Falconheart's kin, not mine. I have no blood relation to any of you."

"That may be." Falconclaw mewed without moving his gaze away from the path ahead of them. "But Thornstar loved your mother, and his kits with the exception of his son didn't want anything to do with him. So you were his next choice."

Nightheart flicked her ears. "I highly doubt he loved my mother." She growled, thinking of Echoheart. "If he loved her so much, why didn't he just have kits with her? Instead of Echoheart having to lie to my father."

"Because he wanted to focus on his son, Thrushclaw was very hard headed. He wanted nothing more than to impress his father and Thornstar wasn't sure what would happen if he had more kits."

Nightheart snorted. *I was only born because Thornstar's own son was a brat.* She tried to hide her annoyance. "Still, why did *you* tell him."

"Thornstar saw me training Falconheart and wanted in, Thornstar's name is very sour in SunClan and probably will be for a long time."

"And his name isn't sour in AshClan? He nearly destroyed my Clan." Nightheart growled, lashing her tail.

Falconclaw looked down at her, a glint in his dark amber eyes. "And

yet you let him train you."

Nightheart let out a snort and fluffed up her pelt. "I'm letting Thornstar train me so I can protect my Clan from fleabags like him, he's no threat to me or my Clan."

"I see." Falconclaw chuckled, there was something dark and sinister in his eyes, but Nightheart couldn't quite place it; but it made her fur stand on end.

As they moved through the trees, Nightheart heard the sound of fighting cats. "What's that?" She questioned.

"You'll see." Falconclaw led her through the dying trees, in a small clearing Nightheart began to make out the shapes of two large cats. These cats were locked in a violent battle, she could smell blood and hear the hissing and yowls of the fight. They neared closer and Nightheart noticed that one cat was Thornstar, he had another golden-brown tabby pinned to the ground, his paw on his throat.

Nightheart let out a small gasp as she realized the other cat was Falconheart, he gasped for breath as Thornstar choked him. "Let's see how it long it takes you to wake up." Thornstar taunted Falconheart, but the SunClan warrior couldn't reply, he was clearly struggling. Nightheart felt hurt stomach churn watching this, she wanted to see Falconheart get beat in fight not killed! "Maybe you'll just die before then."

She had never seen Thornstar fight so violently! *Has he been holding back on me?* She wondered. Nightheart took a step forward to intervene, but Falconclaw moved forward first. "That's enough, Thornstar." Falconclaw spoke and Thornstar immediately lifted his paw from Falconheart's throat. The golden-brown tom sat up, gasping for air and coughing. His entire body trembled as she struggled to catch his breath. *I've never seen Falconheart like this before.* She thought, he always looked like such a brave, fierce warrior. However arrogant he was, Falconheart was a talented fighter, but his fight with Thornstar made him look like a blind apprentice.

"You showed him quite enough." Falconclaw mewed, looking down

at Falconheart with an interesting burn in his amber eyes.

"What are you doing here? Why is *he* here?" Falconheart demeaned, his voice dry and cracking.

"I needed someone to put your ego in check." Falconclaw explained. "And it's time you had a training partner, someone who *isn't* already dead." Falconclaw glanced over his shoulder at Nightheart, and Falconheart realized for the first time that she was there.

"Nightheart." Falconheart growled. "What is she doing here?" He stood up, trying to look big but his legs shook.

Nightheart snorted. "Really? Trying to look big and strong? I *just* saw you get your tail handed to you."

Falconheart hissed. "Shut up." He snarled, turning his attention away from Nightheart and back to Falconclaw. "I'm not training with her. I've already beaten her before, *and* saved her from coyotes."

Falconclaw rolled his eyes. "Maybe I should've let Thornstar kill you." He sighed. "Nightheart is *just* as capable a fighter as you are, maybe more. She has a little humility at least."

"You see," Thornstar smoothed down his chest fur, the fight clearly had phased him in the slightest. "Nightheart is *my* apprentice. She fights like me, and you clearly can't win against me."

"I want nothing to do with her." Falconheart lashed his tail.

"Trust me, mange-pelt." Nightheart stepped forward to defend herself. "I want nothing to do with you either. You're an arrogant, violent, reckless cat who cares for no one but himself. I don't *need* to train against you, I already know I can beat you."

"You want to test that out?" Falconheart stepped closer, his claws ripping into the ground beneath them. "Don't forget who won when we were apprentices." Nightheart hissed, remembering the battle against AshClan. She had fought against Falconheart and he had wounded her shoulder pretty badly.

Nightheart's eyes rested on the scar across the bridge of Falconheart's nose. "That's a nice scar." She sneered. "Where'd you get it."

Falconheart's flashed fury and he lashed out at her, Nightheart braced herself for a fight but Falconclaw knocked Falconheart to the side. "What gives?" Falconheart spat, jumping up to his paws. "You said you wanted us to train against each other." Nightheart flattened her ears, she was just as confused.

'You've already been beaten tonight, Falconheart." Falconclaw explained. "You're not in any condition to fight her. After you've recovered then you two can have a real fight, and we can really see which of you is the strongest." Falconclaw looked at Nightheart. "Until then, it's time for you two to return to your nests."

"And remember," Thornstar spoke up. "You won't be fighting two dead cats, you're both alive and whichever one loses will have to face the other in the waking world. There's a lot riding on this, isn't there?"

Nightheart and Falconheart met gazes, she felt pride and anger burning up inside her. *What I wouldn't give to knock him down.* She bared her teeth. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Falconheart narrowed his eyes, showing his sharp fangs. "I *won't* lose."

Chapter 8

Honeyfrost couldn't shake her dream with Honeywing. *Follow my heart.* Honeyfrost repeated to herself over and over, wondering what she could possibly do. Her heart wanted to heal her Clanmates, but also wanted to be with Blackstorm. *My heart doesn't* know *what it wants, and neither do I*. Honeywing sighed and continued laying out leaves to dry.

"Honeyfrost!" A slight panicked voice pulled Honeyfrost's mind back to reality. She saw Sedgefern and Petalbreeze hurrying up to her with Dovepool between them. The young warrior looked sickly, her eyes were clouded and Dovepool struggled to keep her balance. "Something is wrong with Dovepool."

Honeyfrost stood up and left her leaves behind. "What's wrong with her?" As she spoke, Dovepool let out a dry cough, similar to Snakewhisker's. The cough was clearly painful, Dovepool's entire body shook.

"She's had a cough for a few days now, but she was coughing like this all night. " Sedgefern explained. "And she's burning up!"

Honeyfrost placed a paw on Dovepool's pelt, it was incredibly warm. The she-cat radiated heat. Honeyfrost's ears flattened, what Snakewhisker had was spreading. "Dovepool come with me," Honeyfrost explained and then turned to her sisters. "You two, go wash off in the stream and come to me if you show any symptoms."

She didn't wait for the two cats to respond before she began leading Dovepool away, towards the medicine cat den. "Honeyfrost!" Another voice stopped her, it was Rosewind. Honeyfrost looked towards her and saw that Hollypaw was looking very similar to Snakewhisker and Dovepool. Honeyfrost's heart twisted. The dark ginger apprentice let out a violent cough. "She's been doing this since dawn, and her pelt is burning."

"Hollypaw come with me," Honeyfrost commanded. "You go follow

Sedgefern and Petalbreeze, do what I told them to do." *I need to get these two in the den before we have an outbreak!*

Honeyfrost got them into the den and quickly made nests. "Lay down." She told the sick cats, she took a quick look at Snakewhisker. He hadn't moved since this morning, and his breathing was slow. *Please, StarClan.* Honeyfrost prayed silently. *Don't take him from us!*

Poppyfur had showed Pebblestep the herb that they needed, dark gray leaves with speckled gray spots called lungwort, but they had no idea where to find it. Poppyfur had also explained that the sickness was called yellowcough, it was rare but it was very deadly. Since then, Pebblestep and Honeyfrost had taken turns scouring SunClan territory for the herb, but to no avail.

"What's wrong with us?" Hollypaw questioned. "Will we be okay?"

"You have yellowcough." Honeyfrost replied. "And Pebblestep and I will do everything we can to make sure that all three of you recover."

Honeyfrost gave Dovepool and Hollypaw doses of coltsfoot, honey, feverfew and poppy seeds to put them to sleep. She felt panicked and rushed, she felt like she couldn't do anything. *Where is that stupid herb!* She cried silently.

Dovepool and Hollypaw quickly fell asleep, Honeyfrost sat in the den monitoring their breaths, fearing that they would stop. Her biggest concern, however, was Snakewhisker. She looked over at the gray elder, his breathing was so rough.

Honeyfrost padded over to her friend, placing her paw on his back so she could feel his breathing. *So shallow.* Honeyfrost's heart twisted. Underneath her paw, Snakewhisker's body shifted and his dull green eyes opened.

"How are you feeling?" Honeyfrost asked quietly.

"Light, I feel light." Snakewhisker breathed out, closing his eyes. "I can see the stars, I'm spinning through the sky. It almost feels like

swimming." His paws twitched, as if he was actually trying to swim. "I want to keep swimming, Honeyfrost."

Honeyfrost tried to choke back her emotions. "But you have to come back to land." She whispered, he wasn't making much since the fever had made him delirious.

"But swimming." Snakewhisker mumbled. "Swimming..." His voice trailed off and Snakewhisker drifted off back sleep. Honeyfrost sighed, she had no idea what to do.

"Honeyfrost?" Honeyfrost turned around as Pebblestep poked her head into the den. "Sedgefern and Rosewind told me that Dovepool and Hollypaw are sick?"

Honeyfrost nodded. "And Snakewhisker is completely delirious." She closed her eyes. "Any sign of the herb?"

"No, but I think I know where it is." Hope suddenly sparked in Honeyfrost's chest. She stood up and faced her mentor. "You do? Where?"

"I think it's in MoonClan territory." Pebblestep explained. "I thought as hard as I could about the herb, and what was around it when Poppyfur showed me. I didn't see any trees, but I could smell water and heather, and I could hear birds chirping. It *has* to be there."

"Are we allowed to go to MoonClan territory?" Honeyfrost questioned. "If we don't then Snakewhisker could die, and--" She looked at the other two." Hollypaw and Dovepool."

"We have no choice, and we are medicine cats, but I will tell Dawnstar." Pebblestep explained.

"Should one of us wait here with Snakewhisker?" Honeyfrost suggested.

Pebblestep shook her head. "We can find he lungwort faster if both of us go, to cover more ground, plus Oneflight should be able to help us too."

The two medicine cats rushed out the den and towards Dawnstar's,

she was inside with Lionclaw and Cinderflame as usual. "Dawnstar," Pebblestep didn't wait for pleasantries. "I think lungwort is in MoonClan territory, I'm not really asking for permission but I'm telling you that Honeyfrost and I are going there to search. We will ask Shadowstar, but we *need* this herb or we could lose Snakewhisker, Hollypaw and Dovepool."

"Go then." Dawnstar urged. "I know you didn't ask, but you have my permission and I'm Shadowstar will give you permission as well. I'll have Adderstrike keep an eye on Snakewhisker for you."

"Thank you." Pebblestep gave a quick nod and she and Honeyfrost began sprinting out of SunClan camp. The two of them had absolutely no time to waste. Honeyfrost began to feel a spark of hope in her chest, they would be able to save Snakewhisker!

They crossed both rivers, and stopped their sprint once in MoonClan territory, but didn't wait for a patrol. They came across one about half-way to MoonClan, led by Feathercloud along with Pigeonpelt, Icepool and Fogbreeze.

"What are you doing here?" Feathercloud demanded.

"Three SunClan cats are very sick, I know that MoonClan has sick cats as well." Pebblestep began quickly explaining. "I believe that the herb we need is in your territory, if we don't hurry then Snakewhisker will die."

Feathercloud shared a concerned look with Pigeonpelt. "We do have sick cats, and Ravenheart is one of them. He's very weak, and Minnowkit is sick as well. We will escort you to our camp and help in anyway we can."

"Thank you so much." Honeyfrost dipped her head and the group of cats hurried to MoonClan camp, a deep hollow.

"Shadowstar! Oneflight!" The two cats were talking just outside the medicine cat den, a large oak tree. "Honeyfrost and Pebblestep are here, they think the herb you're looking for is in our territory.

Oneflight broke away from Shadowstar and ran up to the SunClan

medicine cats. "You think the lungwort is in our territory? I've looked all over."

"It *has* to be here." Pebblestep mewed. "We need to search every corner, Snakewhisker doesn't have much time."

"Neither does Ravenheart." Oneflight sighed. "Shadowstar, can the SunClan medicine cats search our territory for the herb?"

Shadowstar nodded. "Of course, I trust you two. Just please, find it and save our cats!" Without much waiting, Oneflight, Pebblestep and Honeyfrost set out to search for the lungwort. With Oneflight as their guide, they vowed to search the entire moor.

They searched for a long time, and Honeyfrost's previous hope was starting to fade. *With every moment that passes, Snakewhisker gets closer to dying!* The sun was setting, and Honeyfrost was beginning to lose hope when she heard the fluttering of wings. She looked up to see a sleek raven sitting on a branch.

The bird looked down at Honeyfrost, twitching its beak as if urging Honeyfrost to follow. Honeyfrost ran towards the bird, which took off from it's branch and flew a small circle above the ground. Honeyfrost noticed a lower dip in the ground, and to her shock spotted the dark green leaves, spotted with gray.

Once she spotted it, the raven took off, vanishing in the distance. "It's the lungwort!" Honeyfrost cried out with joy. "Oneflight! Pebblestep! I found it!" She yelled as loud as she could until they showed up.

"Good job, Honeyfrost!" Pebblestep sprinted up to the herb and began picking it.

"Run back home!" Oneflight told them. "Hurry!" Pebblestep and Honeyfrost both took a mouthful of the lungwort and began sprinting across the moor. Honeyfrost's legs began to ache, but she refused to slow down. *We're coming Snakewhisker! Just hold on!* She pushed herself to run faster, Pebblestep was a blur beside her.

The moon was slowly beginning to rise, the stars sparkling

overhead. *Snakewhisker isn't joining you yet, StarClan!* Her hope burned bright inside her chest, they crossed into SunClan territory and Honeyfrost soon saw their camp in the distance.

Honeyfrost forced herself to slow down a little as they broke into the camp. Adderstrike stood outside the medicine cat den, his wide and pained blue eyes broke Honeyfrost's spirit. *No, it can't be!*

"Adderstrike, did something happen to Snakewhisker?" Pebblestep demanded as she approached him.

Adderstrike nodded, but he didn't look sad...he looked scared. "Snakewhisker is missing."

Chapter 9

"What do you mean he's missing?" Pebblestep demand. "He's a sick cat, where did he go?"

"I went to watch him after I got back from the dirtplace but he was gone! He couldn't have been missing very long, I checked him just before that." Adderstrike explained, his voice trembled.

"Honeyfrost." Pebblestep spoke sharply. "Track Snakewhisker down, I can't do it so you have to, and Adderstrike I need you with me to keep Dovepool calm while I treat her, okay?" Adderstrike nodded, but Honeyfrost hesisted. *What if I find him and he's...* "Go, Honeyfrost! He couldn't have gone far, take the herb with you."

At her mentor's command, Honeyfrost shoved her fears away and sniffed the air, beginning to search for Snakewhisker. *Why would he leave?* Honeyfrost wondered. *He's completely delirious, I have to find him!* Honeyfrost caught the scent of sickness and herbs, it had to be him! She quickly began following the trail, he was sick so he couldn't have made too much ground.

The trail led Honeyfrost out the backside of camp, and she suddenly realized where he was going. She quickly began sprinting away from camp, behind SunClan camp was a large hill, when she sat there she often felt closer to the stars and she had told Snakewhisker about it as well. *He's dying...he wants to be close to the stars.*

Honeyfrost ran as fast as she possibly could, her body sore and her lungs aching, but she refused to give up. *I have to find him before he dies!* Honeyfrost reached the hill and climbed it, just as she predicted, Snakewhisker was lying down at the top.

"Snakewhisker!" She cried and the tom stirred. *I'm not too late!* Honeyfrost reached his side, his eyes were opened and staring at the stars. The beautiful sky reflected in his green eyes. "I'm so glad I found you, we found the herb!"

She put it on the ground to begin treating him, but Snakewhisker put his paw on hers, stopping her. Honeyfrost looked up, her heart breaking. "What are you doing? Let me help you." Her voice cracked.

"No, Honeyfrost." Snakewhisker mewed. "I feel it," He closed his eyes. "I feel Stormwind calling me."

"No!" Honeyfrost ripped her paw away from his. "You're delusional, you need to be treated!"

"My head has never been more clear." He spoke, looking back up at the stars. "I've felt this for a while, and I'm ready."

"No, you're not ready." Honeyfrost's body began to tremble. "I-I can still save you!" Suddenly she was back in the medicine cat as an apprentice, treating Snakewhisker's leg. "I can save you." Her voice faltered. "I can..."

"No," Snakewhisker lowered his head, looking at her. His eyes were bright, and full of love and hope. "It's too late for me." His voice was so quiet, so dry. "And I've accepted that. For so long, I was so scared of dying but...I know that I'm ready to see my beloved again, to see my daughter." He closed his eyes again. "I've done what I can for SunClan."

"We need you!" Honeyfrost cried, her body shaking. "I need you! You helped me with Falconheart, you helped me when Bramblepelt died! I need you!" Honeyfrost's legs collapsed, and she fell against Snakewhisker who began to slowly purr.

"You haven't needed me for a long time, Honeyfrost." Snakewhisker's voice filled her mind. "You've grown up into an amazing medicine cat. I gave you advice but you followed your own path. You are Honeyfrost, SunClan's amazing medicine cat. You're not my kin, but I am so, *so* proud of you."

"What about Adderstrike? He needs you...we all do."

"Adderstrike is grown up, he has kits of his own who will soon have their own kits. My time in SunClan is over, I'm leaving behind some

amazing cats, SunClan will go on without me."

Honeyfrost buried her nose into Snakewhisker's pelt. "Please...Snakewhisker, don't leave us." His breathing was starting to slow.

"I'm sorry, Honeyfrost." Snakewhisker laid his head down, closing his eyes. "But I'll *always* be here to guide you, but I won't have a broken leg...I won't be sick...I'll be strong and healthy again. With my Stormwind. I'll watch over SunClan from StarClan, but you have to watch over SunClan from here, okay?"

Honeyfrost didn't say anything, she closed her eyes and laid with Snakewhisker, there was nothing she could do and the reality washed over her like a freezing, suffocating wave. Snakewhisker had done so much for SunClan, how could they let him go? "Goodbye, Honeyfrost." Snakewhisker spoke one last time, his voice trailing off into a painful silence.

Honeyfrost pressed against her friend, feeling his breathing slow down. It got slower and slower until his body became completely still. Honeyfrost couldn't wrap her mind around it, Snakewhisker was right beside her but he was gone. Gone forever, living in the stars now. She would never hear his voice again, never hear his stories or advice again.

She couldn't save him, there was nothing she could. Honeyfrost felt empty and useless, how would she tell the Clan? Was he in StarClan already? Back with Stormwind? Honeyfrost opened her eyes finally, looking at Snakewhisker's silent body then towards the stars.

"Please," She whimpered. "Stormwind...take care of him. Let him know how much we loved him and how much we'll miss him." Honeyfrost couldn't move, her body felt cold and broken.

"Honeyfrost?" She heard a familiar voice calling her, through the silencing pain she could the voice of Falconheart. "Honeyfrost are you out here?"

"I'm on the hill." Honeyfrost spoke as loud as she could, but her voice was weak and broken. She heard pawsteps in the grass and

Falconheart reached the top of the hill.

"Honeyfrost did you--" His voice broke off as he saw Snakewhisker. "Is he?" Honeyfrost turned away, not wanting to say the words. Falconheart moved closer, pressing against Honeyfrost. "I'm so sorry, Honefyrost." Falconheart said calmly, Honeyfrost didn't think she had ever seen Falconheart this gentle. "I know how much he meant to you."

"He didn't want me to save him." Honeyfrost whimpered, burying her nose into Falconheart's chest. "He stopped me." Falconheart didn't reply, he rested his chin on Honeyfrost's head on stayed silent, his warmth comforted her. They sat together in silence for a few long moments, but Honeyfrost knew that she had to return to camp.

She had to tell SunClan that Snakewhisker was dead, they had to sit vigil for him and send him to StarClan. "We should go." Honeyfrost whispered and stood up, looking her brother in the eye. His amber eyes were saddened, filled with love, sympathy and sorrow. This wasn't the apprentice she fought with so long ago, this was her brother. The brother she loved and could rely on. "Thank you, Falconheart."

"I'll always be here for you, Honeyfrost." Falconheart dipped his head. "We will send warriors for his body, let's go home."

They returned to camp, and Honeyfrost spotted Adderstrike first. He ran up to her, blue eyes frantic. "What happened? Where's my father? Did you find him?"

"I found him." Honeyfrost lowered her head. "He was still alive, but it was too late for me to do anything. He died under the stars, I'm so sorry Adderstrike." Adderstrike's legs trembled and gave out from under him.

"He's...dead." Adderstrike stared at her paws. "I can't believe he's dead..." Adderstrike closed his eyes, his body shaking.

"Honeyfrost?" Pebblestep stepped out of the medicine cat den. "Snakewhisker...is he?" Honeyfrost nodded slowly, and Pebblestep

let out a pained sigh. "I-I'll go tell Dawnstar."

As Pebblestep padded away, Adderstrike lifted his head. "Thank you, Honeyfrost." Adderstrike mewed. "Snakewhisker told me everything you did for him while he was in the medicine cat den, and I can't thank you enough. The striped tom touched his nose to Honeyfrost's forehead. "As far as I'm concerned, you're family to us."

Honeyfrost was shocked, she wasn't expecting this from Adderstrike. "Th-thank you, Adderstrike."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the SunTree for a Clan meeting!" Dawnstar's call sounded from the SunStone, her green eyes were filled with pain and her voice lined with sadness. Honeyfrost, Adderstrike and Falconheart headed towards the center of camp for the announcement. "It comes with great pain and sorrow," Dawnstar began, her voice cracking. Honeyfrost knew how much Snakewhisker had done for her mother, this was surely devastating for her, it would be for the whole Clan. "That I must announce the death of Snakewhisker."

Shocks and gasps spread through the Clan, the aura of the cats quickly turned into suffocating sadness. "His sickness became to great and he passed. I think I speak for all of SunClan when I say that his loss will be painful and we will miss him dearly. Snakewhisker served SunClan for so long, he taught me how to be a deputy when I was lost and had no idea what I was doing. Snakewhisker may be gone, but he leaves behind kits and grandchildren who will continued to remind us of the incredible warrior he was."

Adderstrike stepped forward. "Snakewhisker was the best father I could've ever asked for." He spoke, his voice trembling. "When Dovetail died, we all grieved together. Then I lost my mother and Snakewhisker told me to stay strong, to never lose hope and that Stormwind would watch over us. Now I know that my sister, my mother, and my father will guide me and my beautiful daughters into the future. I will *never* forget everything that he gave to us."

The Clan took a moment to remember their lost warrior, sharing stories of Snakewhisker's kindness, bravery and humor as he spread

love and hope to all of SunClan. His body was retrieved by Sandfoot, Rainears and Crowfur and the Clan held vigil. Honeyfrost closed her eyes, remembering all the moments she shared with Snakewhisker.

"Thank you for everything." She whispered. "SunClan will never forget you."

Chapter 10

Falconheart picked at his prey, struggling to find his appetite. The sadness in the air was thick and suffocating like smoke from a fire. I had been a quarter moon since Snakewhisker's death and SunClan was still adjusting. The warrior had been well respected and loved by the entire Clan, Falconheart had never personally been incredibly close to Snakewhisker but he knew that Honeyfrost was, he also knew how upset she was over his death.

He helped out when he could, but he couldn't take away her sadness or her grief, he couldn't bring Snakewhisker back to life he could only help her come to terms with his death but there was wasn't really anyway he could speed that up. Honeyfrost and the rest of the Clan would find their peace with Snakewhisker's death, and they would find the means to be happy again.

Falconheart pushed away his fresh-kill, unable to take anymore bites. He thought about his own personal troubles, he and Nightheart had yet to have their fight in the Dark Forest, and he hadn't even dreamt there since the two were introduced. Falconclaw really was allowing him to recover, his loss to Thornstar wasn't *that* bad.

He remembered that night with a sharp cringe, all he pictured in his mind was Thornstar's dark, malevolent amber eyes as they bore into his. His paw cutting off all of Falconheart's breath. He hated the fact that he lost, he had no idea that Thornstar was *that* strong. *My mother fought and killed him.* Falconheart thought. *And even then she lost a life doing so.*

"Hey there," Falconheart felt a paw nudge him, making him focus back on the real world. He looked up to see Sedgerfern. The fluffy she-cat looked at him with sparkling green eyes. "You in there?"

"Oh, uh." Falconheart's pelt burned, embarrassed that Sedgefern had found him daydreaming like a lovestruck kit. "Sorry about that. Just thinking."

"Understandable." Sedgefern shrugged and sat down beside him. "What are you thinking about? I-If you don't mind telling me, that is." The warrior shuffled her paws, ducking her head slightly.

Falconheart blinked, he wasn't quite ready to share that he was training in the Dark Forest with her, the only cat who knew was Honeyfrost. So he did something he wasn't particularly proud of, but didn't really have a choice on: he lied. "Just thinking about Snakewhisker. It's strange not having him around." He didn't want to linger on his lie for too long. "How's Dovepool doing? She recovering okay?"

Sedgefern nodded. "Both she and Hollypaw are back on duties, but it was scary there for a moment. I saw how bad Snakewhisker had gotten and I didn't want to see Dovepool end up like that." She sighed. "I'm glad that Honeyfrost and Pebblestep found that herb in time to save the two of them, even if it was too late for Snakewhisker." She glanced around, as if trying to find a way to continued their conversation. "How is your sister doing? Is she doing okay with his death?"

Falconheart cast his gaze at the ground, giving a quick glance to the medicine cat den. "I haven't really gotten to spend any time with her since then. They were close, she looked up to him in a way and she had to watch him die. I know it's not easy for her, but I'm there for her when she needs me."

"That's very sweet of you." Sedgefern's purr was smooth, her voice filled with admiration.

"I'm just being brotherly." He gave an awkward chuckle, the way Sedgefern looked at him sometimes was odd and it made his pelt feel hot. *Why does she do that?* He wondered, but shook it away. "I wasn't a good enough brother when we were apprentices, so I really have a lot to makeup for."

"How were you a bad brother?" Sedgerfern questioned curiously. "When you two were in the nursery you seemed close, at least that's how I saw it."

Falconheart let out a deep sigh of regret. "It's a long story."

"I have time." Sedgefern encouraged him, Falconheart looked up at her. Her green eyes were soft and comforting. "Maybe we could talk and hunt, I know how much you like keeping your paws busy."

"Uh," Falconheart glanced around, wondering if he was needed for anything. He saw Cinderflame sending Cloudspots, Burnpaw, Flashtail and Heatherwind out on the sunhigh patrol. "I don't see why not." He stood up and the two warriors headed towards the entrance of SunClan camp.

He wasn't quite sure if he would tell Sedgefern about what he did to Honeyfrost in the past, would it change how she saw him now? Falconheart really liked having Sedgefern as a friend and he didn't want to risk losing that. *Wouldn't it be better to tell her the truth than to hide it?* For a split second, Falconclaw's eyes flashed in Falconheart mind. *I can't...not the whole truth anyway.*

"So..." Sedgefern mewed once they were a good distance away from camp. "What happened with you and Honeyfrost? Did you guys have a fight?"

Falconheart shook his head. "Not exactly. You remember when I got in trouble for leaving the camp as a kit? And again when I tried to fight AshClan." Sedgerfern nodded. "Well, I kind of...blamed my punishments on Honeyfrost. I thought that if she would've stayed with me my punishment wouldn't have been as harsh, and then I was mad because she got to help Pebblestep in the battle, yet I had to go hide in the moss hollow." He flicked his ears, remembering the sharp anger and hostility he felt towards Honeyfrost as an apprentice.

"And when she became a medicine cat apprentice it made me even angrier, I wanted to train with my sister so I convinced myself that she was throwing her life away as a medicine cat. We got into an argument and I told her I thought medicine cats were useless. It really upset her and it really drove a wedge between us." Guilt crept up Falconheart's spine. "I didn't apologize until my mother made me, but even then I didn't really mean it." Falconheart looked up at the sky as he and Sedgefern walked. "Then when Echoheart attacked our camp, I got so scared when Honeyfost was injured. I guess it was then when I realized that she needed me, and I needed

her. I can't take back what I did when I was an apprentice, I can only try and make the future better."

"Oh wow." Sedgefern breathed out, causing Falconheart to tense up. Did she hate him now? "I suppose it's good that you made up, I don't know what I would do if Dovepool or Petalbreeze hated me, they're my best friends."

"I wasn't the best cat when I was younger." Falconheart turned away, his stomach aching. *And I'm not the best cat now.*

"Maybe so," Sedgefern nudged him, pulling Falconheart's gaze back to her. "But you've changed. I know that because you're sitting here talking to me about this and you have admitted that you used to be bad."

Falconheart blinked, he hadn't expected *this* response. "I-I suppose."

Sedgefern giggled, taking Falconheart even more by surprise, he hadn't really seen this side of Sedgefern, he liked it. "It's not like you to be at a loss for words." She nudged him playfully, making Falconheart's entire pelt burn.

"We uh," He cleared his throat. "We should hunt, that's half of what we came out here to do."

"Alright." Sedgefern purred and Falconheart forced himself to focus on hunting. *Hunting is what I'm good at.* Falconheart reminded himself. *Not whatever is happening here.* He breathed in the forest air, tracking the scent of prey. He quickly caught a trace of squirrel on the breeze and began scanning the undergrowth.

It didn't take long before Falconheart spotted a fat red squirrel scurrying along the forest floor, digging up the earth. Falconheart dropped into a crouch, honing in on the squirrel. He took note of everything around him, stray leaves and fallen twigs, anything that would compromise his hunt.

Falconheart crept forward with silent pawsteps, the trees overhead dappling shadows across his tabby pelt. *Almost...* Falconheart unsheathed his claws, took a deep breath and gave a powerful leap.

His paws landed directly on the squirrel, he broke its neck and killed it with ease.

"Great catch!" Sedgefern praised from a few mouselengths away. "Though you certainly do take a long time." She nudged forward a squirrel comparable to his own. Falconheart stared at it, she had snuck off and caught her own while he did his? He didn't feel threatened or undermind, he felt impressed!

"You're a pretty good hunter," Falconheart trotted up to her, a wave of playfulness rushing over him. "And while yours was caught *quickly*...mine is bigger." He held his head high, giving Sedgefern a playful glance.

"Oh yeah?" Sedgefern's eyes glistened. "I could catch a squirrel *twice* the size of that one." She declared.

"I'm already looking at one." Falconheart sneered, Sedgefern's ears flattened playfully. She reached out and batted him gently across the nose.

"Well I'm looking at a rat!" She jumped back and bowed into a playful stance.

"Say that to my face!" Falconheart taunted and jumped after her. Sedgefern took off into a run and Falconheart took chase. Together, the two warriors ran through the forest. Falconheart felt his heart racing, he couldn't remember the last time he had this much *fun!*

He never really played as an apprentice, he really missed out! Falconheart ran as fast as he could, but Sedgefern was fast. She was nothing more than a blur of gray fur, Falconheart could barely keep up with her.

"Woah!" Sedgefern let out a mew of shock and came to a sudden stop. Falconheart tried to slow down, but his paw caught on a sharp stone jutting out of the ground and caused him to tumble directly into Sedgefern.

The two SunClan cats tumbled down a small hill and into the abandoned badger den. Sedgefern landed on top of Falconheart's

back, but both of them were laughing. "Sorry about that!" She apologized, getting back onto the ground.

Falconheart sat up, unable to stop laughing. His heart continue to pound in his chest, he couldn't catch his breath but it wasn't a bad thing. "It's okay." He attempted to straighten his fur, but noticed a burning pain in his forepaw. He looked down, noticing a thin line of blood across the back of his paw. He must have cut on the stone that caused him to trip.

"Oh!" Sedgefern exclaimed. "Your paw! Are you okay?" She gave his paw a gentle sniff, eyes swarming with deep concern.

"Yeah I'm fine." Falconheart assured her, licking the small wound. "It's barely a scratch, I've faced much worse."

"Well that's good." Sedgefern stepped back, looking away. The she-cat looked flustered, she licked the fur on her chest awkwardly. "Sorry about that, I guess I got a little carried away with playing. I know it's not what warriors do. You're hardly a playful cat, so--"

Falconheart blinked, is that how his Clan saw him? Boring? Not willing to engage in anything that wasn't patrolling or hunting. "Don't apologize, Sedgefern." He assured the she-cat. "I had fun, and just because I don't have a lot of fun doesn't mean I don't know how to. I just--never really had a friend play with."

Segdefern's gaze softened. "Well," She purred, making Falconheart's pulse race even faster. "You have one now."

Chapter 11

Nightheart opened her eyes and for the first time in several days, she found herself in the Dark Forest. *Is it finally time?* Nightheart questioned, feeling the fur along her spine rise. Was today the day she would face off against Falconheart? Was she ready? Nightheart shook her head, flexing her claws. *Of course I am. I can easily win against Falconheart.* She told herself, knowing that she could win against the SunClan warrior.

Nightheart waited for Thornstar, assuming that he would be there to find her instead of Falconclaw. She didn't like Falconclaw, he was intimidating and looked dangerous. She also hated that Thornstar, Falconclaw and Falconheart were all related. She had no idea why she had been included in this family gathering. *The only connection I have to Thornstar is that my mother had a crush on him.* She thought bitterly, twitching her tail tip.

Nightheart heard pawsteps in the shadows and braced herself to face either Thornstar or Falconclaw. She was a little thankful when Thornstar stepped out of the darkness. "Are you ready, Nightheart? Today is the day you prove yourself against Falconheart.

Nightheart just nodded, she didn't really *want* to fight Falconheart. She had no reason too, she supposed it was "training" but she couldn't help but feel that Falconclaw and Thornstar had some kind of darker plot. *If Thornstar and Falconclaw both live here, what kind of cat is Falconclaw?* She had never heard of the cat, and she didn't really care to learn about his past.

She had learned a few things about him from the last time they met. Falconclaw was Thornstar's uncle and was his mentor when Thornstar was an apprentice but that was all Falconclaw had disclosed. "Let's go." Thornstar mewed and guided Nightheart through the forest.

It wasn't a very long walk until they spotted Falconclaw and Falconheart sitting in the clearing. "Ah, welcome you two!"

Falconclaw stood up and greeted Thornstar and Nightheart. "I've been waiting for this night for a long time." *Oh, I'm sure you have.* Nightheart narrowed her eyes.

She glanced at Falconheart but couldn't read any emotion on his face other than a faint determination. "Let's not waste any time." Thornstar mewed. "We don't have all night." Nightheart took a deep breath and padded into the center of the clearing, as did Falconheart.

Nightheart faced Falconheart, his claws glinting in the dull moonlight. Nightheart took a deep breath, suddenly aware of her racing heartbeat. *Why am I so scared?* She clenched her jaw, she couldn't shake the fear that was biting at her skin. *I've seen Falconheart fight, he's strong. He's powerful. He's dangerous.* Nightheart met Falconheart's gaze, his deep amber eyes were determined and focused.

Don't let him get to you. Nightheart reminded herself. *If I do that...he wins.* Nightheart cast a quick glance towards Falconclaw and Thornstar. The two warriors sat side by side, looking at the two cats, just...waiting. Nightheart was waiting for them to give the signal to go, that's what Thornstar said they would do.

Nightheart heard movement across from her, she snapped her head towards Falconheart and saw the SunClan warrior charging towards her. Nightheart didn't even have a chance to react, Falconheart tackled her to the ground and dug his claws into her pelt. She felt their painfully sharp tips pierce her skin, ripping through her body and drawing blood.

Nightheart let out a hiss of pain, and forced herself to react and fight back. With her claws drawn, Nightheart twisted out of Falconheart's painful grasp and sank her teeth into his foreleg. She tasted his blood as it touched her tongue, she only bit down harder.

Falconheart pushed his hindpaw into Nightheart's lower belly, the pain was intense but Nightheart didn't let go. She gripped her paws on either side of Falconheart and raked her claws down his side. Falconheart yowled in pain, but he still kept Nightheart pinned to the forest floor.

He just doesn't quit! Nightheart had to fight harder, she bit down as hard as she possibly could into Falconheart's leg. With all of her might, Nightheart pulled her head back, her teeth ripping through his fur and flesh. Falconheart ripped his leg back and stumbled backwards, blood dripping down his leg.

Nightheart finally had a moment to get back on her paws, the white fur was now stained red. She saw Falconheart looking at the wound on this leg, taking several heavy breaths. *I can't give him time to recover!* Nightheart ran forward, reaching Falconheart in just a few short moments.

She slammed him as hard as she possibly could into the ground. He let out a sharp hiss of surprise and struggled under Nightheart's weight. Nightheart drug her claws down his tabby pelt, drawing blood with ease. He kicked his hind leg up, hitting Nightheart directly in the throat.

Nightheart choked as his paw impacted her throat and took the air from her body. Her force weakened and Falconheart jumped up, flipping Nightheart over and onto her back. Her spine hit the hard forest floor. Her entire body went stiff and her head buzzed from the pain, her mind starting to blur.

Why can't I fight him? Nightheart felt her initial fear climbing into her chest, making her body tense up. Nightheart finally refocused and Falconheart towered over her, his amber eyes were dark and there something about them that drove fear deep into Nightheart's chest.

He wouldn't kill me, would he? Can I even die here? She had woken up with wounds before, but could she really die.

"Go on, Falconheart!" Through the blood roaring in her ears, Nightheart could hear Falconclaw shouting. "Finish her!"

Finish me? Nightheart quickly turned her head to Falconclaw and Thornstar, Falconclaw was watching with malicious, burning amber eyes and Thornstar just slowly shook his head. *They really* do *want me to die!* With a loud hiss, Nightheart lashed out with her paw, raking her claws across Falconheart's cheek. "Get off me!" She spat,

and suddenly the darkness faded from Falconheart's ears.

Falconheart, looking somewhat confused and surprised, stepped back and let Nightheart stand up. "What's the meaning of this, Nightheart? Surely you're not scared of Falconheart, you're better than this." Thornstar's eyes filled with disappointment that just made Nightheart angrier.

"I'm not scared of him," Nightheart lashed her tail. "I'm not fighting to the death for your amusement." Her claws ripped at the forest floor. "This has nothing to do with our actual training, does it?"

"I wouldn't have killed you." Falconheart mewed from behind her, she turned around anger snapping inside of her.

"You could've fooled me!" She hissed, turning away. The anger inside bit at her like an annoying mosquito. "I'm leaving!" Nightheart turned away from the three cats, storming through the dark forest. She wasn't quite sure where she was going but she didn't want to stick around the group of arrogant, violent toms.

Nightheart had gotten a decent ways away from the other cats, but didn't have much knowledge on where she was. She had never taken the time to explore the Dark Forest and she really didn't plan on starting now, she just wanted to leave but she wasn't sure how to do that on her own. *All I have to do is wake up, right?*

Pawsteps sounded from behind Nightheart, she twitched her ears in annoyance. "Nightheart!" The annoyed and scolding mew of Thornstar came through the trees. Nightheart flicked her tail and refused to turn around to greet him. The former leader approached Nightheart, he was standing just behind her now. "You want to explain to me what happened there? I thought I was training a warrior not a scared mouse!"

Nightheart whirled on him. "You're training me to protect my Clan! Not to kill other cats! I didn't sign up for this, I wanted to be a better warrior, not *you*!"

"You asked me to train you! You think you're going to be a better warrior by gentle training with Rabbitspring?" Nightheart snarled as

Thornstar mentioned Rabbitspring, she didn't want this disgraceful cat even saying her name. "You become a better warrior by pushing yourself! By fighting dangerous fights!"

"I can't exactly become a better warrior if I let cats like Falconheart tear me apart now can I?" Nightheart lashed her tail. "I'm *leaving* and you can't stop me." Nightheart turned away once more and closed her eyes. *Wake up. Wake up. Wake* up!

Nightheart opened her eyes and she was safely back in her nest in AshClan camp. Her body stung from the wounds that Falconheart had given her. Nightheart looked over her pelt, it was stiff with dried blood. *I have to take care of this before someone notices.* NIghtheart stood up and carefully exited the den.

Stormheart was sitting guard at the camp's entrance, and with their new camp it was much harder to sneak out. Luckily, Nightheart had a dark pelt with the exception of her white paws. She crept along the back stone wall of AshClan camp until she reached the forest.

Once she was clear from any eyes watching her, Nightheart sat down and cleaned the blood from her pelt. Her wounds stung, she hoped they wouldn't be too obvious to her Clanmates. She took some time out in the forest to think. She wondered if she would return to the Dark Forest. When she was an apprentice she enjoyed the training, she enjoyed the challenge and the adrenaline that raced through her body when she fought Thornstar.

Now, however, when she left the Dark Forest she had a bitter taste in her mouth. She didn't feel good about, she just wanted to focus on her life as an AshClan warrior. She wanted to spend time with Rabbitspring and have peaceful nights. *Maybe it's time to say goodbye to Thornstar.*

Chapter 12

Honeyfrost passively organized the raspberry leaves, barely focusing on her task. Her mind wasn't wandering, it was just blocking out the world around her. It had been several days since the death of Snakewhisker and Honeyfrost still felt his loss like a burr under her skin. No matter how much she tried to focus on other things, or tried to keep her paws busy: the sharp feeling of loss and pain was still constantly biting at her.

Honeyfrost looked down at the raspberry leaves, they had plenty of them. She gently touched her paw to one, enjoying the soft texture. She closed her eyes, wanting to focus on something else, *anything* else and yet everytime she closed her eyes she saw Snakewhisker's body lying underneath the stars.

"I'd give anything to see you again." Honeyfrost said under her breath, she felt lost. She had never lost a cat truly close to her and she wondered if this hollow ache would ever go away.

"Did you say something, Honeyfrost?" Pebblestep spoke up from the other side of the medicine cat den where the gray and white she-cat swept up stray moss and herbs with her tail.

"Just muttering about the herbs." Honeyfrost lied, she knew that Pebblestep was concerned about her. Honeyfrost didn't want to get her mentor anymore reason to be worried. Honeyfrost stacked the raspberry leaves neatly in a pile beside the other leaves they had. Her gaze lingered for two long on the lungwort leaves. *Those should've have gone to save Snakewhisker.* Honeyfrost thought painfully and turned away from the herb store.

"Is there anything I need to do in camp?" Honeyfrost questioned Pebblestep, wanting to get a breath of fresh-air. *I need to get out this den.* Usually she loved the tangy scent of herbs, but now it was suffocating.

"I don't think so." Pebblestep replied after thinking for a moment.

"You know, Honeyfrost. You're not confined to this den, if your duties are done then you can do whatever you want."

"Right." She stared at her paws, despite wanting to get out of the medicine cat den she still wanted something to do. Just sitting in the camp doing nothing wouldn't help keep her mind occupied.

"How about you go out with Hollypaw, Burnpaw and their mentors. You could teach them some herbs, it never hurts to teach apprentices what herbs are useful or any warrior for that matter. I'm sure Cloudspots and Rosewind won't object either."
Honeyfrost blinked, she had never taught anyone before but it *was* something to do. She could really focus on what she knew and perhaps it would distract her from Snakewhisker for a while.
"Alright, Pebblestep. I'll go do that."

Honeyfrost brushed past her mentor and out into the camp. Her green eyes scanned the camp for the apprentices or their mentors. It didn't take long for her to find Cloudspots at the nursery visiting Cherryleaf and his kits and Rosewind was sitting with Larkthorn outside warriors den sharing a vole.

Honeyfrost quickly crossed camp to the two warriors. "Hi, Rosewind. Larkthorn." Honeyfrost greeted kindly, once their conversation had stopped.

"Good morning, Honeyfrost. Did you need something?" Rosewind questioned.

"Yeah, Pebblestep suggested that I could teach Hollypaw and Burnpaw some herbs. We could go out in the forest and I could show them some helpful herbs." Honeyfrost explained, hoping that Rosewind would agree.

"That sounds like a great idea." Rosewind purred. "They're currently cleaning the elder's den so I'm sure that would be exciting for them."

"I know I'm not an apprentice anymore," Larkthorn chimed in. "But mind if I join? It would never hurt to learn something about herbs and I have nothing else to do."

"I don't mind." Honeyfrost replied, she didn't expect Larkthorn to want to join in. *I was never really close to Larkthorn when she was an apprentice.* Honeyfrost thought. *And once Sorrelpaw died, she really distanced herself from everyone.* Honeyfrost felt sadness creeping along her pelt. *She knows what I'm feeling.*

"Why don't you let Cloudspots know." Rosewind suggested, making Honeyfrost focus on the two she-cats again. "And I will go grab Hollypaw and Burnpaw. Larkthorn, you can meet us at the camp entrance."

All three cats agreed and Honeyfrost padded to the nursery, poking her head inside. Cloudspots was on his back as Windkit and Bluekit climbed over him and Snowkit pounced on his tail.

"Hi, Honeyfrost." Cherryleaf purred from where she watched her kits and mate play, her green eyes sparkling with amusement. "What brings you to the nursery?"

"I was going to go out with Burnpaw and Hollypaw and their mentors to teach them about herbs. I figured Cloudspots would want to go, Rosewind is coming too."

"I want to go!" Snowkit squeaked. "I want to learn about herbs!"

"Me too!" Bluekit jumped up and down on Cloudspots's belly, which clearly caused him discomfort but he didn't stop his daughter.

"Can we all go?" Windkit chimed in, sitting beside Bluekit.

"Sorry, kits." Honeyfrost let out a purr, something she hadn't done since Snakewhisker died. Kits always cheered her up. "But you can't leave the nursery yet, maybe when I get back I'll teach you some things here."

"That would be so cool!" Windkit jumped up and landed directly on Cloudspots's chest, the warrior let out a sharp intake of air. "Oops, sorry." Windkit said bashfully and slid off of her father, running up and nuzzling his cheek.

"It's alright." He laughed. "But I should get going." He carefully removed Bluekit with his paw and stood up, shaking stay moss from

his pelt. "When I come back I'll bring you girls something tasty."

"Can't wait!" Snowkit turned in a circle. "See you soon!"

"Learn lots." Cherryleaf touched her nose to Cloudspots and the white and gray warrior followed Honeyfrost out of the nursery. Rosewind had already gotten Hollypaw and Burnpaw and were waiting by the camp entrance with Larkthorn.

"Are we ready to go?" Rosewind questioned as Honeyfrost and Cloudspots approached. Every cat gave a nod and Cloudspots looked down at Honeyfrost.

"You're the one who knows herbs, you lead the way." He told Honeyfrost. She suddenly felt anxious, she wasn't use to *leading* cats. *How hard can this be?* Honeyfrost told herself, trying to give herself some confidence.

Honeyfrost ran through some common and useful herbs in her head that would benefit the apprentices the most. "We'll head towards the stream." She guided, deciding on marigold to be the first one.

The cats crossed through the forest, Honeyfrost leading the way. Hollypaw and Burnpaw bounded along, laughing and having fun. For a moment, Honeyfrost was grateful that Hollypaw had recovered so well. The apprentice was once again filled with joy, energy and enthusiasm. Looking at her now, it would've been impossible to tell that she was sick. *At least we were able to save Hollypaw and Dovepool.* Honeyfrost thought sadly.

After their short trek, the SunClan cats reached the stream and Honeyfrost approached the marigold. "This is marigold, it's one of our most useful herbs." She brushed the golden leaves with her pad. "Marigold can be used to stop infection as well as bleeding. It can also be used to treat inflammation or stiff joints. We use it by chewing the leaves or petals into a poultice, or we trickle the juices into the wounds."

Hollypaw and Burnpaw approached the marigold and gave it a sniff. "It smells tangy." Hollypaw pointed out, then looked up. "What does it taste like?"

"See for yourself." Honeyfrost stepped aside, letting out a small chuckle. She knew that apprentices hated to eat herbs, she wondered how they would react to the bitter taste of marigold.

Hollypaw didn't hesitate, she pulled a golden petal off with her teeth and chewed it up. The she-cat's fase twisted and she spat out the semi-chewed up herb. "That's gross! How you do you chew that up all the time?"

Honeyfrost let out a small laugh. "Well, I do it to treat my Clanmates. I'm used to the taste now."

"What's next?" Burnpaw questioned, which Honeyfrost had already thought about. "Let's cross the stream." Together, the SunClan cats crossed the stone and reached the other side of the river and approached the large stone pile. Honeyfrost led the group to the stones and led them to a collection of chervil.

"This is chervil," Honeyfrost explained. "We use the juices to treat bellyaches or infected wounds. This one smells sweet." Hollypaw and Burnpaw both gave it a sniff, exchanging their interest at the sweet smelling herb.

Honeyfrost and the group continued on, Honeyfrost showed them comfrey, feverfew, tansy, daisy, sorrel, juniper berries and horsetail before Cloudspots called it a day. They travelled well into the day until late sunhigh. Hollypaw and Burnpaw talked about herbs the whole way home, and Honeyfrost was really grateful that she got the two apprentices excited about learning herbs. She really hoped that what she taught them would be beneficial to them later in their lives.

"Let's stop a hunt for a moment." Cloudspots suggested. "I promised my daughters I would bring back some prey for them, and you two haven't done any hunting today."

"I won't argue." Larkthorn mewed. "Hunting never hurt anyone." Honeyfrost felt somewhat awkward, as she didn't know how to hunt.

"I'll just search for some herbs over here." Honeyfrost told her

Clanmates and started sniffing around for any herbs that she and Pebblestep might need. The scent of pine needles grew strong and Honeyfrost realized how close they were to the AshClan border.

Honeyfrost remembered with a stab of pain that since Snakewhisker's death, she hadn't gone out to meet Blackstorm. She had barely thought about him lately, and that made guilt stab her chest. *I should see him again but...*

"Honeyfrost?" As if summoned, Honeyfrost heard Blackstorm's voice. She jumped, alarmed by his sudden appearance. She saw Blackstorm standing on the other side of the border with a pile of chickweed at his paws.

"Hey," Honeyfrost avoided his icy gaze, staring at her paws. "How are you?" *Why are you making stupid small talk.* Honeyfrost asked herself, feeling stupid and awkward.

"I'm doing alright." Blackstorm looked around, then stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Do you have Clanmates around?"

"They're off hunting, but I doubt they will be gone for very long." Honeyfrost explained, forcing herself to meet Blackstorm's gaze, causing her heart to start racing.

"Where have you been? Did you get caught coming out to meet me?" Blackstorm questioned, and the painful guilt returned, slicing into her heart.

"N-no." She dropped her head. "Snakewhisker died and it's been hard to recover from. He was my friend."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Blackstorm's voice was somber and soothing. "Was is that sickness you and Oneflight told us about at the half-moon?"

Honeyfrost nodded. "Hollypaw and Dovepool also got sick, but they recovered. It was too late for Snakewhisker though." She let out a saddened sigh, her heart twisting. Teaching Hollypaw and Burnpaw about herbs had distracted her from Snakewhisker, but now she was talking about it again. "I'm sorry I haven't been coming out, but I

promise I'll try and make it tonight."

"Don't worry about it, Honeyfrost." Blackstorm assured her. "If you don't make it, I understand." Honeyfrost met his gaze and she knew that he wanted to be closer to her right now, and she wanted him closer but they couldn't risk it with their Clanmates around.

Honeyfrost tensed as she heard pawsteps coming from behind her, she looked over her shoulder and saw Larkthorn step out of the trees. "Oh," She mewed, looking at Blackstorm. "Good evening, Blackstorm." She dipped her head. "What are you doing out here?"

"Just collecting some herbs." He motioned to the chickweed. "Saw Honeyfrost and thought I would ask her about the sickness she told me about."

"Yeah," Larkthorn sighed. "Sad what happened, but luckily we didn't lose all three cats." She dipped her head and looked down at Honeyfrost. "Rosewind sent me here to find you so we could go back to camp."

"Alright." Honeyfrost had to force herself to act like she only knew Blackstorm as a fellow medicine cat. "See you at the gathering, Blackstorm." She dipped her head and turned away from the cat, she wished that she didn't have to leave him. Maybe avoiding him these past few days was a mistake, surely he would be the one to make her feel better.

"You doing alright?" Larkthorn questioned as they left the border. Honeyfrost didn't look up, she just stared at the forest floor as they passed over broken branches and loose leaves. "I noticed that you've been incredibly down lately.

Honeyfrost shrugged. "Just missing Snakewhisker."

Larkthorn sighed sadly, looking up at the sky. "I know how you feel. Losing someone you care about is painful. I watched both Pikepaw and Sorrelpaw die, and getting over their death has been the hardest thing I've ever done, I wouldn't even say I'm over it." She stopped walking and stared at her paws. "I don't think I ever will."

Honeyfrost looked at the she-cat. "So I'm going to be sad about Snakewhisker forever?" She questioned, feeling a strong sense of hopelessness.

"Not exactly." Larkthorn lifted her head. "You'll learn to live without him, you'll come to terms with the fact that he is gone. Being sad about Snakewhisker forever won't do anything, you have to continue on with your life and duties. Snakewhisker, along with Pikepaw and Sorrelpaw are looking down on us, watching over us. They want us to be happy and safe, they don't want us to be depressed forever."

Honeyfrost thought about her words, she had a point. She couldn't lie in her nest all day and night missing Snakewhisker, she had responsabilites, her Clanmates needed her. *They need me and yet...I'm going to sneak off to see Blackstorm again.*

Chapter 13

Blackstorm watched Honeyfrost and Larkthorn disappear into the trees of SunClan territory. He felt incredibly sad for Honeyfrost, but also semi-relieved. The past few days Blackstorm had thought that Honeyfrost wanted nothing to do with him anymore or that she had gotten caught trying to sneak out.

As he thought about that he felt slightly guilty, he knew how much Honeyfrost cared about Snakewhisker. Blackstorm didn't know much about the former SunClan warrior but he knew that he was a well respected among all four Clans. He had nearly fallen to greencough on the journey to the mountains, but he had overcome it.

Blackstorm was excited about seeing Honeyfrost again tonight, however. He had been missing her more than anything lately. It had been hard to focus on his duties around camp even though he had been sleeping more.

Blackstorm decided he had been standing here long enough, Skyfeather would probably be expecting him back at camp soon. He lowered his head and picked up the bundle of chickweed that he had collected. Blackstorm began walking away from the SunClan border and back towards AshClan camp.

On his way he stopped to grab a bundle of juniper berries, wrapping them in a large ivy leaf to secure the berries. Blackstorm crossed the river after getting a quick drink and returned to camp just before the sun began to set.

Blackstorm stepped into the medicine cat den where Skyfeather was picking up some borage that he had set out to dry. "You were gone quite a while." Skyfeather pointed out, his tone had a slight edge to it.

"Sorry," Blackstorm replied, not looking at his mentor. Skyfeather had been acting weird the past few days and his temper had been

short, Blackstorm wasn't sure what was causing it but he did his best to make sure he didn't upset him. "I ran into Honeyfrost by the border, she told me that Snakewhisker died to the sickness that he had."

"That's a shame." Skyfeather mewed, putting the boarage in their herb store. "Did she say anything about Ravenheart? He was sick as well."

Blackstorm shook his head, he hadn't thought about Ravenheart. He hoped that the MoonClan medicine cat was okay, for Oneflight's sake. "If I see Honeyfrost again before the gathering I'll ask her."

"You be sure to do that." Skyfeather pushed past Blackstorm and out of the medicine cat den, twitching his silver tabby tail. Blackstorm stared after his mentor in confusion. *What was that about?* Blackstorm wondered, narrowing his eyes. *Does he know about Honeyfrost and I?*

Blackstorm shook his head. *Impossible.* He turned his back on the entrance and let out a heavy sigh. *I haven't even seen her the past few days. He must just be in a bad moon.* Blackstorm tried to convince himself, but he still had anxiety biting at his skin. *I'll be careful...just in case.*

Blackstorm laid in his nest, watching Skyfeather. The tabby medicine cat was curled up in his nest, his back to Blackstorm. He kept watching Skyfeather, wanting to make sure that he was sound asleep before Blackstorm tried to leave. It was late, the Clan was quiet and sleeping with the exception of Dustfall who was sitting guard at the front of camp.

Skyfeather was still, the only movement he showed was the slow rise and fall of his chest as he slept. Blackstorm slowly stood up in his nest and snuck out of the medicine cat den. He looked over his shoulder and Skyfeather remained still and asleep.

Blackstorm looked at Dustfall, the young warrior was sitting at the camp entrance watching. He let out a yawn, but didn't look over his shoulder. Blackstorm crept along the back wall of camp, moved slowly and stayed low to the ground until he was safely away from

AshClan camp.

Once Blackstorm was free from the camp he picked up the pace. The night was calm and cool and his heart was racing. For tonight at least, Blackstorm was an apprentice again. Running out of camp to meet with Honeyfrost, the only cat to make his heart pound in his chest. He couldn't wait to share the night with her again, nothing but the two of the under the stars.

Blackstorm stepped out of AshClan territory and into the neutral territory of the gathering hollow. He was nearly sprinting as he rushed up the hill and towards the hollow. The five trees appeared over the rise, and beside the large stone in the center sat Honeyfrost.

Blackstorm's heart began to race, and it wasn't from the running he had done. He quickly climbed down into the hollow and approached Honeyfrost. Her gaze was off in the distance, staring at something that only she could see. Her mind was cleary somewhere else. "Good evening." He mewed softly, getting her attention.

Honeyfrost broke her focus and turned to look at Blackstorm. "Oh, hi." She stood up. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too." Blackstorm stepped forward, touching his muzzle to hers, breathing in her sweet scent. "I missed seeing you every night."
"I missed seeing you too." Honeyfrost mewed, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry again, things have just been hard since Snakewhisker died."

"I told you," Blackstorm stepped back. "It's okay, I understand. We have Clan responsibilities to deal with as well." That sentence seemed to have upset Honeyfrost, she flattened her ears. "What's wrong?" He questioned with concern in his voice.

"It's just..." Honeyfrost turned away, sitting down and slumping her shoulders. "Everytime I think about my Clan responsibilities I feel guilty about when I come to see you, but when I don't see you then I feel guilty that I'm not seeing you." She flexed her claws, digging them into the soft soil. Blackstorm's heart twisted with anxiety. *What's she going to say?*

"What are you trying to say, Honeyfrost?" Blackstorm questioned, fearing the answer. What would he do if Honeyfrost said that she didn't want to see him anymore. "Do you--do you not want to see each other anymore?"

Honeyfrost shook her head slowly, Blackstorm didn't know what to think of it; he didn't know what to think of anything. "I'm not saying that." She spoke, her voice starting to fall to a whisper. "I'm just saying that I'm scared. I'm overwhelmed, and I'm struggling to find my place in this world." Honeyfrost turned away, looking up at the stars. "Over and over since I was an apprentice I've heard the words: follow your destiny, follow your heart." She turned around suddenly. "But which one is it? What is my destiny? What if my heart wants two different things?" Honeyfrost stopped herself, her body trembling slightly.

Blackstorm stared at her, he had been told the same things by Moonwhisker. Follow your destiny, and he never questioned it. He never questioned what his destiny was, he never focused on it. Honeyfrost, however, did not have that luxury. Her world was consumed by her so called "destiny".

Blackstorm took a step closer. "Honeyfrost, listen to me." She met his gaze, those beautiful green eyes were his biggest weakness in this world. "Don't listen to what those cats are telling you. Do you what makes you *happy*. Nothing else matters." He touched his nose to hers. "If being happy is being with me then I will be more than happy to meet you here every single until the day we die, but if being happy is you leaving me and..." His voice cracked slightly, he didn't want to say this; but he knew it would put her mind at ease. "If being happy is you leaving me and focusing on your Clan then I will let you do that, because seeing you happy is worth it, even if I have to watch from a distance."

Honeyfrost stepped back, her eyes filling with love and shock. "Blackstorm I-" Her voice trembled, and after a moment she jumped forward and fell against him. "Thank you so much, you don't know how much that means to me."

Blackstorm closed his eyes, keeping Honeyfrost as close as he possibly could. He longed to speak, to tell her what had been on his

mind since the moment he first saw Honeyfrost, but he just couldn't bring himself to say those words. *I love you, Honeyfrost.*

Chapter 14

Nightheart watched the kits play unable to find the same motivation and energy that the group of kits had. Hailkit and Sagekit wrestled over a small pebble while Dewkit, Mistkit and Slatekit tossed a feather back and forth through the air. Puddleclaw and Silvermoon had been itching to get out of the nursery so Nightheart volunteered to watch the kits while they went out to hunt and stretch their paws.

The kits were pretty easy to watch, at four and two moons old all they really wanted to do was play, and Nightheart was sure that she wouldn't be here for much longer. Nightheart found watching these kits to be incredibly boring, so she understood why the two queens might need a break. *I couldn't imagine being stuck in the nursery for nearly eight moons.* Nightheart shuttered at the thought, kits were cute and fun but she couldn't imagine giving up her warrior duties for a pawful of ktis.

Maybe I'm just not meant to be a mother. Nightheart thought, she had never even considered having kits, not even when she was younger. *No one told me that I* have *to have kits. Riverstar never had kits and she's leader!*

After what seemed like an entire moon, Silvermoon and Puddleclaw returned from their hunting trip. The two queens walked into camp laughing and with their eyes lit up. The two she-cats had grown quite close from living in the nursery, but also because Puddleclaw was mates with Silvermoon's brother.

Nightheart stood up and welcomed Silvermoon and Puddleclaw back into camp. "Did you have a good time?" She questioned kindly.

Silvermoon nodded. "Oh you have no idea, Nightheart. Thank you so much for watching the kits for us."

"It was much needed time out." Puddleclaw purred. "I love my kits more than anything in this forest, but I really needed to stretch my

paws!"

"I understand." Nightheart shrugged. "If you ever need someone to watch them again, just let me know."

"Thank you so much, Nightheart." Puddleclaw's purr was loud. "We'll definitely keep that in mind."

"You're back!" Sagekit suddenly squeaked from behind Nightheart and the tabby kit run up to her mother with Hailkit trailing on her paws. This also got the attention of Mistkit, Dewkit and Slatekit. The three younger kits clumsily scrambled over to Silvermoon and began climbing all over their mother.

"I'm going to get going." Nightheart mewed, letting out a quiet chuckle. *They really are pretty cute though.* Nightheart thought as she padded away from the queens and their kits. Now she felt like she needed to go out and stretch her paws.

Her yellow eyes scanned the AshClan camp, looking for someone to go hunting with. The camp was pretty empty, with the sunhigh patrol already out. The elders were sunning themselves outside their den, sharing stories. Nightheart felt a little weird looking at her father as an elder, he retired before she even became a warrior.

I guess he was older when Echoheart had us. Nightheart thought. *Still, he was never really that involved in our lives.* Nightheart looked over at the medicine cat den, she couldn't see Blackstorm but she knew he was inside the den. *It's always just been the two of us, I know Crowfoot loves us, but still.*

A pretty brown and white pelt caught Nightheart's eyes as she saw Rabbitspring stepping out of the warriors den with Dustfall. Her green eyes were bright and her brother was laughing about something. *Perfect.* Feeling a purr rise in her chest, Nightheart gleefully trotted over to Rabbitspring. "Hey there." She greeted with a gentle purr.

"Hi, Nightheart." Rabbitspring's expression lit up when Nightheart approached, making butterflies flutter in Nightheart's belly. "What's up?"

"Do you want to go hunting?" Nightheart questioned. "You can come along too, Dustfall." Nightheart figured it would be kind to extend the invitation to Rabbitspring's brother instead of ignoring him.

"Thanks, but I'm going hunting with Ravensong and Primroseheart." He shook his head slowly. "We're going to hunt by the north border."

"Sounds good, we'll head towards the SunClan border." Nightheart explained and after a moment, Dustfall was running off towards the she-cats.

"I think my brother has a crush on Primroseheart." Rabbitspring mewed once Dustfall was out of earshot. "Ever since she joined the Clan he's constantly trying to impress her."

"Primroseheart is a very pretty she-cat." Nightheart pointed out. "I wouldn't be surprised if Dustfall had a crush on her."

Rabbitspring's gaze suddenly shot downwards and she shuffled her paws. "You think Primroseheart is pretty?" She stammered and avoided Nightheart's gaze completely. Nightheart had to restrain herself from purring. *I can't believe Rabbitspring is jealous.* She thought.

"She is," Nightheart replied. "But, she's not the prettiest cat in the forest. Not by far." Rabbitspring looked up in an instant.

"Who is?"

Nightheart touched her tail to Rabbitspring's pelt, she could feel the warmth radiating from her body. "It's a secret." Without another word, Nightheart bounded off into the pine trees.

"Wait!" Rabbitspring cried from behind Nightheart and quickly followed her into the forest.

"You gotta catch me!" Nightheart called out playfully, and for a moment Nightheart saw a playful and amused gleam flash across Rabbitspring's face. The small she-cat gave chase and together, the two AshClan warriors raced through the trees.

Nightheart ran through the pine trees, keep a steady pace ahead of Rabbitspring. She jumped over the stream with ease and was nearly to the SunClan border when she felt a weight on her shoulders.

Much to her surprise, Rabbitspring had caught up to her without Nightheart knowing. Rabbitspring jumped and landed and Nightheart's shoulder, bringing her to the ground. The two she-cats kicked up a flurry of grass and pine needles, and Nightheart felt stones digging into her fur but she didn't care; the two she-cats laughed as they played.

"You're a fast one." Nightheart mewed through her sharp breaths, gently pushing Rabbitspring off.

"I wasn't named Rabbitspring for nothing." Rabbitspring laughed, sitting up and brushing the pine needles out of her fur. Nightheart met her gaze and felt an uncontrollable purr rising in her chest. *When she was an apprentice she was so skittish and self-conscious. Now she's brave and confident. She's become such an amazing cat.* Nightheart could barely contain her feelings for Rabbitspring, the warrior was so kind, beautiful and fun. *I want to tell her.*

"Rabbitsping I--"
"Wait," Rabbitspring was suddenly on alert, she stood up with her ears up and her nose sniffing the air. "Do you smell that?"

Nightheart was confused, she looked around not seeing anything. She then sniffed the air and a strange, unexpected odor filled her nose. She could smell squirrel blood, it was stale and starting to go old. "It's prey." Nightheart and Rabbitspring stood up and began searching for the source of the smell.

"Over here!" Rabbitspring called Nightheart over as she was sniffing a collection of brush. Nightheart quickly ran over to Rabbitspring where she saw the half-eaten remains of a squirrel. She felt slightly disgusted, wondering what AshClan warrior would just leave half-eaten prey in the middle of the forest. Not to mention they ate before elders or kits were fed.

"What warrior would do this? We don't have any mouse-brained apprentices." Nightheart snorted.

"Get closer and smell it." Rabbitspring's eyes filled with concern. "I don't think it was someone in AshClan." Confused and intrigued, Nightheart approached the dead squirrel and gave it a sniff.

The scent of SunClan filled Nightheart's whole scent radius, she took a step back. They were close to SunClan border, but not close enough that it could've been mistaken. "SunClan has been hunting on our territory." Nightheart growled. "Grab the squirrel, we need to take this back to camp and tell Riverstar right away."
Rabbitspring, clearly concerned, picked up the squirrel and she and Nightheart sprinted back to AshClan camp. *Why would SunClan steal our prey?* Nightheart wondered, anger sparking inside her like a fie. *It's newleaf! Surely they can't be running low on prey.*

Rabbitspring and Nightheart reached camp and quickly hurried towards Riverstar's den. Nightheart poked her head inside where Riverstar was discussing the gathering with Ashblaze. The leader noticed Nightheart right away. "Yes, Nightheart?" She stood up to face her warrior.

Nightheart motioned with her tail for Rabbitspring to come in where she sat down the dead squirrel. "We were out hunting by the SunClan border when we found this squirrel. It's half-eaten and reeks of SunClan. It was too far into the territory for this to have been a mistake."

Anger flashed in Riverstar's blue eyes, she took a step closer to the prey and gave it a sniff. "SunClan do a lot of questionable things, but it's not like them to waste prey. This squirrel is only half-eaten." She twitched her tail.

"Perhaps it's a message." Ashblaze interjected, her amber eyes glowing with annoyance. "A message that SunClan isn't happy with their current territory and want some of ours. Whoever caught this prey knew what they were doing, even their youngest apprentice would know that they were in AshClan territory."

Nightheart blinked, that seemed to be quite the leap to a conclusion but Riverstar seemed a little too convinced. "Perhaps..." The leader mewed as she slipped into a deep thought. "I don't know what SunClan's intentions are, I will bring this prey up tonight at the

gathering where we can see what the cats for SunClan have to say for themselves."

Nightheart looked around at all the Clan cats gathering in the hollow, talking and waiting for the leaders to begin sharing the news. Nightheart felt anxiety creeping inside her, she wasn't sure what SunClan would do about the prey, but she also didn't want SunClan to get away with stealing AshClan prey. *I just don't want a fight.* She had been enjoying the peace, she didn't want to be the cause of the end of it.

The talking died down as all four leaders jumped onto the large stone in the center of the hollow. "Greetings everyone." Timberstar began. "I hope newleaf has been treating everyone well." There were mews spreading out through the hollow, and the LichenClan leader began. "LichenClan has been fairing very well this season, we welcome Krestlepaw and Briarpaw as apprentices for the time at this gathering." Cheers for the apprentices rang out and Nightheart spotted the two sisters holding their heads high.

Next up was Shadowstar. "MoonClan unfortunately dealt with an unfamiliar illness earlier this moon. We later discovered that this sickness is named yellowcough, and with the help of Honeyfrost and Pebblestep of SunClan we found the herb to treat it. However, it was too late for Ravenheart and he succumbed to the sickness while they were searching for the herb."

There was a long moment of silence for the MoonClan medicine cat, Nightheart knew how old the tom was. He was medicine cat long before Nightheart was even born. "With the herb we were able to save Minnowkit who is now healthy and playing with her littermates once more. I will miss Ravenheart dearly, but I know that Oneflight will be an incredible medicine cat to MoonClan." After the silence, cheers were given to Oneflight who sat humbly at the base of the stone.

"SunClan also suffered from this sickness," Dawnstar continued once Shadowstar was done. "We were able to treat two others, but it was too late for Snakewhisker. He was a wonderful cat and a loyal warrior who will be missed dearly."

Nightheart didn't know that SunClan had lost Snakewhisker, she had always heard such incredible things about the warrior. *If they just lost a treasured warrior why would SunClan be wanting to start a fight?*

"Not all of SunClan's news is sad, however. We welcome Hollypaw and Burnpaw as new apprentices and Dovepool, Sedgefern and Petalbreeze as warriors!" There were more cheers, Nightheart couldn't see the apprentices but the warriors were sitting with their heads high. After the cheering stopped, Dawnstar sat down and gave Riverstar the signal to go ahead.

Riverstar didn't look at the other leaders, she just began speaking. "AshClan proudly brings new warriors to this gathering, please welcome Dustfall, Leafdawn, Rabbitspring and Primroseheart." There was more cheering and beside Nightheart, Rabbitspring ducked her head awkwardly.

"However, that is not the only announcement that AshClan has to make tonight." Nightheart took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves while the other three leaders shared a confused glance. "Earlier this morning my warriors found a half-eaten squirrel inside out borders, reeking of SunClan."

Gasps and hisses of anger rang out from the crowd, mostly from SunClan. Dawnstar narrowed her bright green eyes at Riverstar. "Are you accusing my Clan of stealing prey? Why in the name of StarClan would we do that?"

"Well the prey certainly didn't come from MoonClan." Riverstar lashed her tail. "With where the prey was found it was impossible for it to have been an accident. A SunClan cat purposely caught a piece of prey on AshClan territory, ate part of it and left the rest to become crowfood in our lands."

"SunClan has stolen no prey." Dawnstar growled sternly. "And surely you could've talked to me directly instead of making a scene at the gathering."

"Typical AshClan." Redclaw of SunClan snorted. "Always trying to start fights."

"Is the peace getting to you, Riverstar?" Brackenpelt added. "Your claws itching for a fight?"

Nightheart's pelt bristled as her Clan and leader were insulted, she unsheated her claws and dug them into the soft earth below. "I'll show them a fight!" She spat, but Rabbitspring rested her tail on Nightheart's shoulders, shaking her head slowly. Nightheart retract her claws and forced herself to relax.

Dawnstar raised her tail to silence her Clanmates. "My Clan has a point, Riverstar." She mewed. "You have always been eager to get into fights, perhaps you should do a little more investigating before you accuse SunClan of prey theft." The golden-brown tabby jumped down from the stone. "If you want to actually discuss this with a little maturity then you can come to us."

Dawnstar led her Clan out of the hollow and the gathering was over, Nightheart watched them go and despite the situation being disarmed, Nightheart knew that this would not be the end and Nightheart could only hope that it didn't get out of AshClan's control.

Chapter 15

"Are we going to talk about what happened tonight?" Cinderflame questioned Dawnstar as SunClan returned home from the gathering. "We need to let the rest of our Clanmates know in case AshClan ends up attacking us."

"I will hold a meeting in the morning." Dawnstar responded. "A lot of the cats are probably sleeping, and I want some time to think about what we are to do next."

Cinderflame didn't seem to happy with Dawnstar's answer, but she gave a nod and continued walking back to camp in silence. A lot of SunClan talked about Riverstar's prey stealing accusations while Falconheart was mentally preparing for a battle. He didn't think SunClan stole any prey, why would they? They were in the prime of Newleaf with more prey than the Clan could fit in their fresh-kill pile.

Falconheart walked beside Sedgefern who was sharing her concerns with her sisters. "Do you think AshClan will attack us? I don't think any of us stole prey, but I remember back when we were kits Riverstar attacked SunClan because she was bored.

"Riverstar seems like nothing but a brute if you ask me." Dovepool added, twitching her tail. "All of AshClan do, really."

"I don't think it's fair to judge a whole Clan of cats like that. Riverstar did agree to travel with all the Clans, afterall." Petalbreeze mewed, acting as the voice of reason for her sisters.

"Yeah, but only after the forest was nearly dead and she had no other choice. She didn't want to, we all know that." Dovepool countered. "Riverstar is selfish, I can see it written all over her face."

Falconheart wasn't sure he agreed with Dovepool, he didn't know Riverstar very well. He knew she was stubborn and proud, and that she was very quick to jump into battle but something about this

whole prey stealing situation felt off. *Why would Riverstar lie?*

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the SunStone for a Clan meeting!" Dawnstar's call rang out through the hollow. Falconheart lifted his head from the mouse he was eating. The Clan was very quickly starting to gather, it was early morning but news of the gathering last night had already spread throughout the Clan.

Falconheart quickly swallowed the last piece of his prey and hurried to the SunStone where he sat beside his father, waiting for his mother to begin addressing the camp. "I'm sure by now you have all heard of what happend at the gathering last night." Dawnstar began. "And I while I do worry about Riverstar attacking us, there's more to this than Riverstar and AshClan being battle hungry."

"She lied!" Brackenpelt called out. "Every cat in this forest knows that AshClan are battle hungry, they will do anything to get a fight."

"Riverstar is many things," Dawnstar mewed sternly. "But she's not a liar. Riverstar wouldn't but her Clan in danger of a battle if she didn't think that what she found was true."

"So you really think one of us stole prey from AshClan?" Briarrose questioned. "Why would any of us do that? We have plenty of prey here in SunClan."

"I'm not saying that one of you stole prey." Dawnstar assured the she-cat. "However, AshClan did find something in their territory that smelled of SunClan. I believe that Riverstar believes SunClan stole prey, even though we didn't."

"So what do we do?" Turtleblaze inquired. "It's not like Riverstar will ever believe us, she certainly didn't at the gathering."

"Later today I, along with a few others, will journey to AshClan camp and hopefully have a civil conversation about this prey incident. Hopefully Riverstar and I can come to some sort of understanding." Dawnstar jumped down from the SunStone. "For now, I want patrols to continue as normal, just keep an eye out for AshClan." With that, Dawnstar dismissed the meeting and let

Cinderflame organize patrols.

The deputy didn't look happy about the concept of waiting, but she followed through the patrols. "Alright, I want Redclaw to lead the sunhigh patrol. Take Cloudspots, Burnpaw, Heatherflight, Flashtail and Falconheart with you. Go to the AshClan border and keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary." Falconheart's ears twitched at the mention of his name. "Right now I want Briarrose to lead a hunting patrol with Snowtail, Brackenpelt, Petalbreeze and Earthpelt. Hunt near the stream." With an exchange of nods, Briarrose led her patrol out of camp. "When the sunhigh patrol returns I want another hunting party in the back of the territory. Yarrowtail you'll lead Rosewind, Hollypaw, Sedgefern, Fawnheart and Adderstrike.

"Finally, the night patrol will be lead by Lionclaw and will have Icepetal, Dovepool, Goldenleaf, Flamepetal Mudfall and Larkthorn." All the cats broke off from Cinderflame and prepared for their tasks. It was a while before sunhigh, so Falconheart didn't have much else to do but wait.

"Are we ready?" Redclaw looked over his patrol. "I want every to keep their eyes and ears open, maybe we could find some of the prey that AshClan supposedly found in their territory." Redclaw's mew was dripping with sarcasm.

The patrol set out under the bright, newleaf sun and embarked into the forest. He wasn't talking to many of his Clanmates as they walked through the forest, Cloudspots was telling Burnpaw about an old battle against AshClan and Heatherflight and Flashtail were walking side by side, there heads leaned in close as they talked quietly to each other. *Something's certainly going on there.* Falconheart thought. *It is newleaf after all, looks like we'll be seeing some new kits soon.*

Falconheart had come to respect Flashtail during his time in the Clan, he was a very noble cat. Falconclaw had other feelings towards the former rogue however, they were very similar to his feelings on Dovewish and her kin in the Clan. *I don't know what he's talking about.* Falconheart thought crossly. *He wants me to think the same way but I just...don't.*

The patrol grew closer to the AshClan patrol, Falconheart could see the pine trees rising up in the distance. As they got closer however, a different smell filled his nose. It smelled like AshClan. *We're too far from the border to be smelling them.* Falconheart stopped suddenly, nearly causing Heatherflight to crash into him.

"What's wrong?" The she-cat questioned, looking around and smelling the air. She instantly caught what Falconheart was scenting. The rest of the patrol did as well.

"Spread out," Redclaw commanded. "Find the source, if it's AshClan invading run back and warn the Clan as fast as you can." The patrol broke apart and began scouring the forest for the AshClan cats.

Falconheart followed a trail of AshClan stench and picked up another scent as well that made his fur stand on end. *Blood.* He didn't hear the sounds of battle, but as he moved closer he realized that it was the blood of a mouse. Falconheart continued tracking the scent until he found the source, the half-eaten mouse lying under a pile of leaves.

He gave it another sniff and was overwhelmed by the AshClan scent that lifted off of it. *So AshClan lied about us stealing prey...so they could steal prey?* "Hey!" Falconheart heard the call of Flashtail from a few foxlenegths away. "I found something!"

Falconheart made a note of where he found the prey and hurried to the warrior. The rest of the patrol had started to show up as well to see what Flashtail had found. Falconheart felt anger sparking inside of him as he looked at Flashtail's find. It was the remains of a squirrel, mostly eaten and reeking of AshClan.

"I found prey too." Falconheart announced, getting the attention of his Clanmates. "It was a half-eaten squirrel back that way." He motioned with his tail to where he found the squirrel.

"So *AshClan* are the ones stealing prey?" Redclaw growled.

"But why would they accuse us?" Cloudspots questioned, sounding as confused as the rest of the patrol felt.

"To cover up their theft." Heatherflight snarled. "They're clearing trying to start a fight, so they stole prey from us and then accused us of stealing prey. It's all an elaborate plan to lead to a fight."

"We need to bring this back to Dawnstar, action needs to be taken. We can't let AshClan manipulate us like this." Redclaw declared and the patrol grabbed the two pieces of prey and hurried back to SunClan camp.

Once back in camp the patrol reported to Dawnstar and Redclaw relayed the whole story as well as their theory as to why AshClan was doing this. "This is very upsetting." Dawnstar mewed, twitching her tail as she looked over the two pieces of stolen prey. "I don't know what Riverstar is planning, but we need to find out." Dawnstar stood up. "Cinderflame, Falconheart and Flashtail. You're coming with me, we're going to AshClan camp *now*."

Dawnstar led the group of the cats to the AshClan border where they waited for a patrol to escort them. "We don't need to force ourselves onto their territory, that will only fuel their suspicions." Dawnstar had explained when she decided to wait for a patrol. It didn't take long for the voices of AshClan cats to fill the air. Through the pine trees, Falconheart could see Ashblaze, Ravensong, Dustfall and Lilyclaw. When Ashblaze spotted the SunClan patrol, his fur stood on end and he narrowed his sharp amber eyes.

"Well, if it isn't SunClan. Come to steal more prey from us?" He accused, Falconheart had to refrain from shredding the arrogant deputy's other ear.

"We're here to talk to Riverstar." Dawnstar replied sternly. "We need to discuss some things."

"I'll say." Dustfall snorted, but Ashblaze raised his tail to silence the young warrior.

"We'll take you to Riverstar but we will be watching your *every* move. If any of you SunClan fleabags tries anything I'll be chasing you out of the forest faster than you can blink." Falconheart tensed at the threat, but held back from baring his teeth. *We're on their territory now.*

Falconheart hadn't been in AshClan territory since they first arrived in the mountains, it was completely unfamiliar territory but he still hated the overwhelming scent of pine and the fallen needles that dug into his paw pads.

After crossing the entire territory, the group of cats finally reached the entrance of AshClan's camp. They had formed their home in the stone outcropping connected to the mountains. When they first discovered this area it was completely empty, but now it was lively with AshClan life.

As the SunClan cats stepped into the camp, Falconheart immediately felt the hate-filled, suspicious gazes of the AshClan warriors. One sharp pair of yellow eyes caught Falconheart's attention first, it was Nightheart. The black she-cat twitched her tail in annoyance and took a protective stance in front of Rabbitspring. Falconheart narrowed his eyes in return, he hadn't seen the she-cat since their battle when she ran away.

I always knew I would beat her. He thought sourly and turned away from Nightheart as Ashblaze led them to what Falconheart assumed was Riverstar's den. A huge cave in the side of the stone wall. The blue-gray she-cat stepped out of the cave and stared down the SunClan cats.

"What are you doing here, Dawnstar." Riverstar growled. "Unless you're admitting to your prey theft I don't want to hear what you have to say." Falconheart flattened his ears, finding great annoyance with Riverstar's stubbornness.

"Perhaps you'd like to hear that we found prey on our territory that reeked of *AshClan*." Dawnstar stood tall, her voice stern. Riverstar's eyes blazed with blue fire. "Maybe you should question your own cat's dedication to the warrior code before you accuse mine."

"You dare accuse AshClan cats of stealing prey?" Riverstar's fur bristled and she bared her teeth. "Is this some kind of pathetic attempt at covering up your own theft?"

"SunClan does not steal prey." Dawnstar stated matter-of-factly. "We have no reason to steal prey, but I can promise you that if we

continue to find AshClan stenched prey on our land we *will act.*"

"Get out of my camp!" Riverstar got in Dawnstar's face with claws extended, scraping at the stone floor. Falconheart prepared himself to jump to his mother's defense if things got nasty."If I see any SunClan faces near the border again you will regret it!"

"Watch yourself, Riverstar." Dawnstar didn't even flinch at Riverstar's challenge. "You're beginning to sound like Echoheart." Falconheart's jaw dropped and he heard gasps from both his own Clanmates and the AshClan cats that had been watching.

"*Leave!"* Riverstar roared. "Ashblaze, take them out of our territory and make sure they *never* come back!" Dawnstar turned away from the fuming leader and lashed her tail.

"We won't come back, you can count on that." Dawnstar walked through the camp, ignoring the toxic gazes and muttered insults of the AshClan warriors. Falconheart didn't know how his mother stayed so calm, he had never seen her act like that before, he honestly enjoyed seeing his mother look so brave and fearless. However, as the SunClan cats were escorted by a very angry Ashblaze, Falconheart felt deep down in his chest that it was only a matter of time before a fight between AshClan and SunClan broke out, and he knew it would be violent.

Chapter 16

"Are you sure insulting Riverstar like that was such a good idea?" Cinderflame questioned Dawnstar as they returned to camp. "She looked like she was ready to claw your ears right there."

"It need to be said." Dawnstar mewed, defending her actions. "She's acting like a reckless apprentice, someone had to call her out on her actions. I'm sick of Riverstar acting like she's ruler of the forest and that she's *always* right. That's exactly the kind of behavior that Thornstar showed as a ruler. How long before she's trying to steal territory or kits even."

"I suppose." Cinderflame twitched her tail, she was clearly uncertain of Dawnstar's actions and Falconheart was too. He felt that if a fight was possible before then it was guaranteed now.

"When you organize patrols I want extra prescanse around the AshClan border, we have to be prepared for an attack, because I know it's coming. If we're prepared then Riverstar can't take us by surprise."

"Yes, Dawnstar." Cinderflame dipped her head. "The last patrol of the day should be returning here soon, I will prepare tomorrow's patrols once they get back."

"Thank you, Cinderflame." Dawnstar then turned her attention to Flashtail and Falconheart who had spent the whole trip in silence. "I want to thank you two as well, for coming along as well as holding your tongues." Her green eyes rested on Falconheart. "Especially you, I know how badly you wanted to take a swipe at Riverstar." Falconheart flicked his ears, it was sometimes scary how well his mother knew him. "When you were an apprentice I have no doubt that you would have, you've really grown up." Dawnstar rested her tail on Falconheart's shoulders. "I'm proud of you Falconheart."

"Thank you." Falconheart felt genuinely warmed by his mother's words. *I really have improved, haven't I?*

"Dawnstar!" A panicked cry broke through the evening air. Dovepool suddenly burst through the camp entrance with Icepetal and the rest of the patrol trailing her. "AshClan is in our territory! They're heading towards the camp!"

Instantly alarmed, Dawnstar raced across the camp to the patrol. "How many? Are any of you hurt?" Her green eyes scanned the patrol in a panic. *She's looking for my father.* For a moment, Falconheart tensed up but he saw Lionclaw's golden pelt approach the last of the patrol.

"None of us are hurt, no." Lionclaw assured Dawnstar. "They didn't see us, and it's the whole Clan. This is a battle, we heard Riverstar talking about it."

"We need to meet them out there before they reach camp." Dawnstar raised her voice. "Attention SunClan!" The cats of SunClan stopped what they were doing and looked towards their leader. "AshClan is currently in our territory and heading towards our camp to fight. We need to meet them before they reach our camp." The Clan rose to their feet right away and began to swarm near the camp entrance. "I want Cloudspots, Redclaw, Burnpaw and Applespots to stay back and defend the camp in case any of them reach it. Protect the kits and the medicine cats."

Falconheart looked over his shoulder towards the medicine cat den where Pebblestep and Honeyfrost stood, looking shocked and horrified. "Let's move, SunClan! We don't have much time."

Falconheart broke his attention away from his sister and followed his mother out of camp and into the forest. Falconheart held his head high, bracing himself for this battle. It was eerily quiet and very unsettling. *I've got a bad feeling.* Falconheart thought to himself, but shook the thought away. *Just focus on defending your Clan. That's the only thing that matters.*

The scent of AshClan grew stronger not even halfway to the border, Falconheart's fur stood on end as he heard muffled voices in the distance. "Riverstar!" Dawnstar called out suddenly, her voice echoing through the trees. "I know you and your Clanmates are there! Show yourselves!" Through the undergrowth, AshClan cats

appeared with Riverstar and Ashblaze at the lead. "So you couldn't wait for a battle?" Dawnstar snarled.

Riverstar flexed her claws, her blue eyes glinting maliciously. "You brought this upon yourself, Dawnstar."

"We'll see about that, won't we?" Dawnstar unsheathed her claws. "SunClan! Attack!" At his mother's command, Falconheart and the rest of the SunClan charged forward. Falconheart jumped forward, attacking the first cat in his view, Ravensong. Falconheart dug his claws into her pelt and sank his teeth into her shoulder.

Ravensong let out a hiss of rage and quickly fought back, she swiped with her claws tearing them into Falconheart's side. He ignored the pain of her sharp claws and bit down harder, kicking up one of his hind paws into her belly. The she-cat let out a sharp exhale, but didn't let up. She put her claws firmly into Falconheart's side and used all her force to throw him down.

Falconheart was surprised at the sudden move, but he reacted quickly. Ravensong moved to bring her paw down onto his belly, but Falconheart flipped himself over so her claws met his back instead. It still brought pain and blood, but he could survive a hit to the back.

Falconheart jumped to his four paws and after a brief moment, rose up onto his hind legs. He spun on one paw and raked his claws across Ravensong's cheek, sending a spray of blood to the forest floor, he dropped safely back to his paws and ducked to avoid another blow from her claws.

Ravensong jumped forward, keeping her body low to the ground and slamming herself into Falconheart's legs. The force of the she-cat's weight knocked Falconheart's legs out from under him, causing him to land on top of Ravensong.

She quickly reacted, digging her claws into his shoulder and flipping the two of them so that she was on top. Falconheart's belly was exposed and Ravensong was ready to claw it open. Falconheart kicked his hind paws up and pushed them as hard as he could into her belly, she hissed and spat in Falconheart's face, but for just a

moment her grip weakened.

Falconheart used that window to push his paws against her chest and shove her off, he tossed her a good distance. Ravensong rolled through the leaves, unresponsive for a moment but soon getting back on her paws.

She raced back towards Falconheart but he met her half-way, the two of them slamming into each other. Falconheart slashed his paws at her chest, ripping black fur and flesh while Ravensong bit down onto his foreleg. Falconheart buried his claws into the base of Ravensong's tail and raked his claws along her spine.

Ravensong let go of Falconheart's shoulder and he threw her to the side. Suddenly he heard quick pawsteps as another cat jumped onto his back. Falconheart whipped his head around as Rabbitspring secured herself onto his back.

Falconheart hissed and attempted to buck the small she-cat off, but she refused to let go. *She's like a tick!* Falconheart had another trick to deal with her, he very quickly dropped down and rolled on his back, not giving Rabbitspring a chance to detach herself.

The she-cat let out a squeak of pain and struggled to get out from under Falconheart. With a swift movement, Falconheart jumped back to his paws and swiped with his claws, catching the bottom of one of Rabbitspring's ear, tearing it and causing blood to cover the side of her head.

"I don't think so!" Yet another voice spoke and another, heavier body slammed into Falconheart's. He hit the ground in a flurry of leaves and grass and felt claws ripping into his tabby pelt. The newcomer was Nightheart, her yellow eyes blazing with rage and fury.

"Come to lose again?" Falconheart sneered as she pinned, kicking out with his back paws. His paws connected with her legs, causing her to lose her balance.

"You messed with the *wrong* cat mange-pelt!" Nightheart reared up, claws glinting in the fading sunlight. She brought he paws down

full force onto Falconheart's head, making his world go blurry.

He heard Ravensong and Rabbitspring running back into the fight as well, it was long until he felt their claws ripping at his fur. *Can I really fight three she-cats myself?* Falconheart bit down on Nightheart's paw as it got too close to his teeth. *I have to try!* Nightheart yowled in pain and shoved her other paw against Falconheart's throat.

He had no choice but to let go of her paws and cough as his airway was closed off. He couldn't get up, the three she-cats were making sure of that. *I can't give up!* Falconheart mustered all of his strength to shove Nightheart away, but there was still Ravensong and Rabbitspring to deal with.

Falconheart heard more pawsteps racing closer and he clenched his teeth. *Do they really need to send all of AshClan to me?* However, this new cat pulled Rabbitspring off of him, and caused Ravensong to get off. Falconheart finally got back on his paws and saw that the new cat was Sedgefern. The gray she-cat was quickly batting away at Rabbitspring and Ravensong.

There was a fire in Sedgefern's eyes as she fought, giving Ravensong a powerful blow to the side of the head. The black she-cat stumbled and backed off. Rabbitspring looked concerned and stepped back from Sedgefern. "Ravensong!" She mewed. "You should go get some help, you're badly hurt."

Ravensong hesitated, but turned and vanished into the forest. *Now it's fair.* Falconheart thought, spinning on his paws as Nightheart charged back towards him. Falconheart jumped forward, landing on Nightheart's back and bringing her to the ground. He fixed his claws into her shoulders and rolled her over, kicking at her belly with his back legs.

"Winning against you is getting boring." Falconheart taunted her as she struggled to break free from his grip. "You may almost beat me with three other cats helping you but when it's just the two of us you're just too weak!" Falconheart sank his teeth into Nightheart's shoulder, biting down as hard as he possibly could. He felt a strange feeling in his chest, a feeling of pure rage.

"Nightheart!" Rabbitspring cried out from behind Falconheart and broke his concentration, the small she-cat shoved Falconheart off of her Clanmate and helped Nightheart to her paws. Blood welled at the shoulder bite and Nightheart was panting heavily. "You need to get to your brother."
"I can't." Nightheart spat at Falconheart. "I can't let him win!" She jumped forward and Falconheart braced himself for impact but Rabbitspring stopped her.

"No, Nightheart." The she-cat urged. "You need to leave, *now*." The tiny she-cat seemed to have some kind of hold over Nightheart because the black she-cat let out a grueling sigh and turned, running into the forest with Rabbitspring on her tail.

"That was...weird." Sedgefern mewed, stepping up beside Falconheart. "What kind of history do the two of you have."

"I can't explain it right now." Falconheart replied without looking at Sedgefern, which wasn't a lie; they had a battle to fight. "We have bigger issues to deal with." He looked around, the two Clans were still locked in the violent battle.

He saw Heatherflight and Flashtail fighting side by side against Stormheart. The AshClan tom had a large wound over his eye, but Heatherflight had blood pouring from a wound on her hind leg. Earthpelt and Briarrose fought against Dustfall, and even though the two she-cats were older and bigger Dustfall fought back with the might of two cats.

AshClan is significantly smaller than SunClan. Falconheart realized. *They've been training to take two cats on at once.* Falconheart took a quick look at Sedgefern, her gray fur was ruffled and torn but she seemed mostly unharmed. Then he noticed a nasty bite wound on her foreleg. "You should have the wound looked at." He motioned. "It looks bad." The wound leaked blood, staining her dark fur red.

"It's fine for now." Sedgefern looked at her wound. "It doesn't even hurt that bad."

Falconheart was unsure, but he trusted Sedgefern. "Just be careful, I'm going to look for any cats that need help." Falconheart turned

and began running through the battle. The battle was loud, yowls filled the air as the sun slowly slipped from the sky. The smell of blood was the only thing that Falconheart could smell.

A loud hiss of fury caught Falconheart's attention and he turned towards the source. Dawnstar was facing off against Ashblaze, both cats bleeding from heavy wounds. Dawnstar looked tired, and Ashblaze wasn't letting up.

Falconheart quickly began running towards his mother's aid. As he ran, the fight continued. Ashblaze managed to get Dawnstar into a powerful hold and the SunClan leader struggled to get away. Falconheart forced himself to run faster, but Ashblaze kept fighting.

Dawnstar hissed and raked her claws down Ashblaze's chest. He yowled in pain and moved forward the speed of a serpent. His teeth sunk into Dawnstar's throat, and Falconheart's mother let out a cry, cut off by a choke as she gasped for air.

Falconheart came to a dead stop, his entire body freezing. Ashblaze let Dawnstar fall to the ground, the light in her green eyes faded and her body went completely still. *She's losing a life!* Fire raged inside Falconheart, an anger that he never felt before filled his entire body, clouding his mind.

Suddenly, all of the pain and aches from his wounds and fighting vanished. Falconheart let out a yowl and charged forward, tackled the AshClan deputy. Without thinking, Falconheart's claws ripped into Ashblaze's pelt. "I'm going to make you regret that." Falconheart hissed into Ashblaze's ear.

Ashblaze fought back with full force, his claws piercing Falconheart's body. Falconheart fought back harder with each blow that he took. Ashblaze swung his paw at full force, catching Falconheart's ear and tearing through it. Falconheart let out a yowl of pain, he felt blood running down the side of his head but he didn't let back. *He stole one of my mother's lives!* Falconheart thought, biting down into Ashblaze's leg.

Are you going to stand for that? Falconheart heard a voice in his head, it was Falconclaw. *Are you going to let this sad excuse for a*

warrior steal precious lives from your mother and leader. The anger swelled inside him, it was almost too much for him to handle. Falconheart's mind blurred and red fog clouded his head and mind. *No, I'm not!*

Falconheart slashed forward with full force, he felt his claws catch Ashblaze. The deputy let out a choked cry, and blood sprayed Falconheart's face. The world slowed down as Falconheart met Ashblaze's gaze. His amber eyes were filled with shock, and Falconheart struggled to focus. *What's happening?*

Ashblaze hit the ground and there was a cry of alarm from behind Falconheart. "You killed Ashblaze!"

What? The red fog shattered and Falconheart was back in the fight, he looked at his paws, stained with blood. Ashblaze was on the forest floor, his eyes wide open and starting to gloss over. A pool of blood formed at Ashblaze's throat, where Falconheart's claws had ripped through. *No.* Falconheart thought, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

The cat who had cried out was Foxfeather, the ginger she-cat stared at her deputy's body in pure shock. "How could you do this!" She had gotten the attention of Haresong as well and the two cats raced forward to attack Falconheart.

Falconheart couldn't move, his blood had turned to ice and frozen him in place. Before the two AshClan she-cats reached him, Lionclaw and Adderstrike jumped in the way, batting the she-cats away.

Falconheart forced his head to turn to look at Dawnstar, she was starting to wake up. The blood from her wound had stopped, but she looked exhausted. Falconheart met her green eyes. *I didn't mean to do it.* He hoped his eyes said to her, she just have a slow, sad nod. Falconheart looked down at Ashblaze's body, expecting him to get up like Dawnstar did, but Ashblaze only had *one* life.

Falconheart couldn't stand up straight any longer, he sat down, his mind spinning and his stomach churning. *This isn't real.*

Chapter 17

Nightheart reluctantly limped away from Falconheart and Sedgefern with Rabbitspring at her side. *I can't believe I lost again.* She cursed under her breath. *Why can't I beat that stupid cat!*

"Nightheart," Rabbitspring mewed quietly, Nightheart looked down at the she-cat. Her pelt was stained with blood and the wound on her ear continued to bleed which made Nightheart's stomach knot. *I couldn't even defeat him when I was protecting Rabbitspring.* She sighed. "What happened back there? Do you have some kind of history with Falconheart that I don't know about?"

Nightheart stopped in her tracks. *I can't tell Rabbitspring about the Dark Forest. I just can't.* "Back when I was an apprentice we attacked SunClan camp." Nightheart explained. "He picked a fight with me before he was an apprentice, I didn't know that at the time, though. That's how he got the scar on his nose." She thought back to that day. "His father chased me off, but that wasn't the last of it. Later, when he actually was an apprentice there was another fight but he beat me then. Much in the same way." She looked at her shoulder, the blood slowly falling from her wound. "He's just so arrogant and I can't stand it, he gets under my skin."

"Well you can't be reckless." Rabbitspring mewed, staring at her paws. "I don't know what I would do if I lost you."

Nightheart looked away, feeling incredibly guilty. *She's right. I'm better than this, I'm not a reckless apprentice; I'm a warrior.* "I'm sorry, Rabbitspring." Together, the two she-cats found Blackstorm and Skyfeather who had been waiting at the edge of the border with herbs to treat wounded cats.

Ravensong had made it here along with Lilyclaw. The tabby she-cat had some nasty claw marks down her belly which Skyfeather was treating. "Nightheart," Blackstorm looked up from Ravensong, his blue eyes resting on her shoulder wound. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Blackstorm." Nightheart assured him. "But I should probably get this treated, and Rabbitspring needs her ear treated."

"That can wait until after the battle." Rabbitspring mewed, it's not that bad." Nightheart didn't agree but she didn't have the energy to argue. She sat down and waited for Blackstorm to treat her.

The entire time that Blackstorm chewed up marigold and used cobweb to soak up the blood and stop the bleeding he didn't speak. He seemed incredibly off, and Nightheart had a big theory as to why that might be. *He doesn't like the fact that we're fighting Honeyfrost's Clan.* Everytime she thought about Blackstorm and Honeyfrost it made her angry, both for the fact that he was breaking so many rules and that he had yet to actually tell her. *We tell each other everything.*

Then why haven't you told him about the Dark Forest? Nightheart asked herself, feeling suddenly guilty. *I guess I don't have much room to complain.* She looked up at Blackstorm who worked hard on treating her wound. *I just wish we were as close as we used to be. What if our friendship is gone forever?*

"There," Blackstorm stepped back, giving Nightheart's shoulder a sniff. "You should be good." She looked at her shoulder, it was wrapped in a thick layer of cobwebs and the smell of herbs flowed off of the dressing.

"Can I go back and fight?" She felt useless not being able to help her Clan in this fight, AshClan had such small numbers.

"Are you serious?" Blackstorm's eyes sparked with annoyance. "I *just* wrapped your wound, you really want to run back out there and have it torn off right away?" He let out an angered sigh and spun around. "Is fighting the *only* thing that warriors think about? Do whatever you want, Nightheart."

The sharp edge to his voice pained Nightheart, he really was mad at her. She flattened her ears. "Relax, Blackstorm." Skyfeather spoke up as he treated Lilyclaw. "And to answer your question, Nightheart: No you cannot go back out there. You have a bad wound, what you can do is stay here and help us. Rabbitspring,

however can go back out. A wounded ear isn't going to stop hinder you."

Nightheart's stomach flipped, she did not want Rabbitspring going back out there if Nightheart wasn't able to go with her, but she stopped herself. *Rabbitspring is a fully capable warrior, I have to believe that she'll come back.*

As Rabbitsping turned to leave, Nightheart jumped after her. "Rabbitspring, wait!" She called, stopping the she-cat.

Rabbitspring turned around. "What is it, Nightheart?"

Nightheart lowered her voice so that the others wouldn't hear. "Just, just please come back okay?"

Rabbitspring purred. "Don't you worry, Nightheart. I will." Nightheart watched uselessly as Rabbitspring ran back into the fighting, her stomach doing flips in her stomach. Nightheart turned away, dropping her ears. *I can't help but feel so useless right now.*

"AshClan!" Riverstar's sudden call rang out through the trees, Nightheart's pelt stood on end. *No.* "Retreat!" *We lost?* AshClan cats came running over the hill towards the AshClan border with SunClan cats chasing after them. Nightheart notices Haresong and Foxfeather carrying something, Nightheart's chest tightened as she realized it was a body.

Who is it? Nightheart strained her eyes to see, for a moment panicking and wondering if it was Rabbitspring but the pelt wasn't even close to hers. It was a dark tabby pelt and it was at that moment that Nightheart realized who it was. *Ashblaze.* The world came crashing down, AshClan lost their deputy? How? Who killed him?

As Ashblaze got closer, Nightheart noticed his paws were covered in large amounts of blood, too much blood for a cat to have survived losing. Soon, Dawnstar appeared at the top of the hill with Cinderflame and Lionclaw by her side. She stood tall but her eyes were tired, she looked shaky and Nightheart noticed an alarming amount of blood at Dawnstar's throat, matting her golden brown

and white fur. *Did Ashblaze take one of Dawnstar's lives?*

"Remember this night, Riverstar." Dawnstar spoke, her voice dry. "You didn't have to start this battle, but you did. You swarmed SunClan territory and both Clans have paid a horrible price. I hope you think about this the next time you decide to fight."

Riverstar said nothing, she didn't even look at Dawnstar. She reached the border and looked at the wounded cats. "It's time we go home, AshClan." Riverstar instructed and AshClan returned to their own territory, wounded and defeated.

By the time AshClan reached the camp it was already moonhigh, and Riverstar told the Clan she would chose the new deputy in the morning. The Clan was battered, bloody and exhausted. Nightheart's shoulder felt stiff and had a horrible ache, causing her to limp through the territory. She had found Rabbitspring quickly, the she-cat only had a few extra scratches from her short time back in the battle, the only bad wound was her ear which had since stopped bleeding.

Due to their small size, Riverstar had sent every AshClan cat into the battle with the exception of the elders and the queens. *Someone is going to have tell Silvermoon about Ashblaze.* Nightheart's heart twisted at the thought, she saw the way Silvermoon looked at the warrior. Her eyes lit up like he was the sun, he was her everything. *Now he's gone and she has to raise their kits alone.*

Nightheart sat down outside the warriors den, watching as AshClan cats flocked to the medicine cat den to have their wounds treated. She noticed Haresong walking by, the she-cat's eyes cast toward the ground. *She was one of the cats carrying Ashblaze's body, I wonder if she knows.*

"Hareong," Nightheart mewed, getting Haresong's attention.

"Yes, Nightheart?" Her voice was strained and exhausted.

"Do you know who killed Ashblaze?" She questioned, she had to know.

Haresong nodded slowly. "Yes, it was Falconheart." Nightheart's stomach turned to stone, her claws scraped against the stone. *Of course it was him. Falconclaw and Thornstar have groomed him into a murderer!*

"I didn't see the whole situation, but Ashblaze had taken one of Dawnstar's lives and Falconheart ran to her defense." Haresong explained, then walked away to check on her kits. Nightheart's anger to confusion. *Falconheart killed Ashblaze but...Ashblaze took one of Dawnstar's lives, Falconheart's mother.* She didn't know how to feel, Falconheart was defending his mother's life but he also took Ashblaze's.

Nightheart had to force herself to stop thinking about the whole situation, she was tired and in pain. She wanted to see how well her Clan was doing. Dustfall and Stormheart were leaving with treated wounds, Stormheart had a dressing over his eye, but otherwise seemed find.

Nightheart closed her eyes, she had been more than willing to fight with her Clan against SunClan and their accusations against AshClan, but now she found herself questioning everything. SunClan had made the same accusations that AshClan did, so how was AshClan right and SunClan was wrong?

Nightheart turned away from the Clan and entered the warrior's den, she wanted to close her eyes and pray that this was all just a horrible dream, she wanted nothing more than go back in time and stop Riverstar from leading AshClan into a fatal battle.

Chapter 18

The medicine cat had become incredibly crowded with injured cats from the battle. Blackstorm was upset about the whole battle for many reasons, and he knew that Skyfeather was as well. Blackstorm sat up in his nest and looked at the messy den, herb scraps were scattered about and there was specks of dried blood on the floor of the den.

Blackstorm had to take a moment to step outside to get away from the scent of wounds and dried blood. It was just past dawn and Blackstorm had barely slept. He and Skyfeather had been up nearly all night treating wounds. The worst wounds were Lilyclaw, Ravensong, Petalshine with a sprained paw and a nasty leg wound and Primroseheart with a bad bite on her neck, but it wasn't close to being fatal. Riverstar also had a deep wound on her shoulder, but she had insisted on sleeping in her own den.

However, the pain in AshClan didn't end with wounds. The Clan had held vigil for Ashblaze the night before, but Blackstorm had been too exhausted to attend. Blackstorm knew that deep down, the deputy never liked him. Ashblaze had never let go of the fact that he was Echoheart's son. Despite all this, Ashblaze and Blackstorm felt somewhat of a mutual respect for eachother. Blackstorm knew that Ashblaze had been a loyal and dedicated deputy, and Ashblaze knew that Blackstorm was a dedicated medicine cat.

The loss of Ashblaze would be felt by all of AshClan for a very long time, especially by Silvermoon. As he thought of the queen, Blackstorm figured he would poke his head into the nursery and see if she was doing alright. He approached the nursery and saw that Silvermoon was awake, the silver tabby she-cat was just staring at her kits. Silvermoon's blue eyes were dull and her pelt ungroomed, an uneaten mouse lay at the base of her nest.

"Have you slept?" Blackstorm questioned, making Silvermoon look up from her kits. "Or eaten?"

Silvermoon shook her head. "No." Her voice was hoarse, she turned her attention back to her kits. "How can I?" She wrapped her tail around Slatekit who snored peacefully. "Knowing that I'll never wake up to see Ashblaze again." Her voice trembled and she buried her nose in the pile of kits.

"I'm so sorry about Ashblaze, Silvermoon." Blackstorm dipped his head, he could feel the sadness pulsing from the queen. "But you can't neglect your needs. Your kits still need you to be healthy."

Silvermoon didn't respond, she just closed her eyes and nuzzled her kits. Blackstorm withheld a sigh. "I'm going to bring you some herbs, please take them." Blackstorm left the nursery and returned to the medicine cat den.

"What are you doing?" Skyfeather questioned, clearly just waking up as he let out a large yawn.

"Silvermoon won't eat or sleep, I'm going to bring her some herbs to help." Blackstorm explained.

"And if she doesn't eat those?" Skyfeather answered.

"I can't force her to," Blackstorm mewed as she gathered the herbs." I just have to hope that she will." Blackstorm wrapped the bundle of herbs and brought them to the nursery. "I brought you some poppy seeds to help you sleep, some daisy to help with your appetite and some chamomile to make you feel better. It makes the heart stronger."

Silvermoon looked at the herbs with glazed over eyes, but she didn't move. "I'll try to take them." She mewed quietly.

"Thank you." That was all Blackstorm could ask for, honestly. He left the nursery one last time, making a note to return later to check if she actually took the herbs. He went back inside where he began to treat the injured cats as they started to wake up.

It was well past dawn now and all the injured cats had been treated and were now resting. Blackstorm wanted to see to the rest of the less serious wounds such as Nightheart's and Riverstar's, but we was

interrupted by the leader's call.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Riverstar called and Blackstorm and Skyfeather stepped out of the medicine cat den, sitting outside of it. *She must be announcing the new deputy.* Blackstorm assumed.

"First of all," Riverstar spoked. "I want to tell you all how proud of you I am. I want to thank you for fighting so bravely--"

"You're *proud* of us?" A sharp, angered voice spoke up from the nursery. It was Silvermoon, the queen had risen from her nest and faced the leader with blazing blue eyes. "You're proud that we fought a pointless battle that *you* led us into?"

Blackstorm's eyes widened, Silvermoon has always been so soft spoken, and now she was challenging the leader. The rest of the Clan shared uneasy glances. "Silvermoon," Riverstar lowered her head. "I know you're upset about Ashblaze--"

Once again, Silvermoon cut Riverstar off. "I'm a little more than upset, Riverstar." She lashed her striped tail. "Because you were too stubborn and arrogant to talk things out with Dawnstar the love of my life is *dead!*" The Clan went silent as an painful and awkward moment plagued them. "Now I have to life my entire life without him by my side, I have to raise my kits without him, every ceremony they have I will be sitting there just wishing that their father could see how amazing they are! But I can't, because *you* lead him to his death!"

Blackstorm and Skyfeather exchanged an uncomfortable glance, they had both been feeling similar about the battle. They both thought it was unnecessary and brought needless consequences. "Who has *always* showed us kindness and compassion? Dawnstar! Which Clan sheltered four of us when we had nowhere to turn when Thornstar was tearing our Clan apart? SunClan!"

"Dawnstar wasn't exactly showing us the most respect when she came to our camp yesterday, was she?" Riverstar growled, clearing getting incredibly upset by Silvermoon's words. "She told me I was like Echoheart."

"That's because you *are!*" There was a chorus of gasps, Blackstorm suddenly felt very, *very* uncomfortable. "Echoheart was violent, reckless and led by her emotions instead of logic, you are *just* like her." With that, Silvermoon turned on her paws and stormed back into the nursery, leaving the Clan in a stunned silence.

There was a long period of silence before Riverstar began speaking again. "Well," She cleared her throat. "I will discuss things with Silvermoon later, but for now I must continue naming the new deputy." She held her head high. "I say these words before the spirit of Ashblaze, so he may hear and approve my choice. Stormheart will be the new deputy of AshClan!"

Despite the awkward and unsettling argument between Silvermoon and Riverstar, the Clan cheered their new deputy. For once, Blackstorm felt confident in a choice that Riverstar made. Stormheart was kind, loyal and fair. He would make an incredibly deputy for AshClan.

Stormheart stepped forward and faced the Clan. "I want to thank you for giving me such a warm welcome as well as Riverstar for giving me this opportunity. I will never be able to replace Ashblaze, but I hope that I can become a deputy that you all can look to for guidance."

Stormheart was celebrated by his Clanmates, with Featherfall and Petalshine rushing to his side as well as Puddleclaw and their kits. The only cat who wasn't there was Silvermoon. *I don't blame her, her mate was just killed as deputy and now her brother is taking his place.*

When the meeting died down, Blackstorm and Skyfeather returned to treating wounds, which they did until about sunhigh. The two medicine cats returned to their den to clean up the scraps of herbs.

Blackstorm was in the middle of putting a bundle of marigold away when he heard pawsteps at the entrance of the den. He turned around to see Puddleclaw waiting. "Blackstorm?" She mewed. "I'm worried about Silvermoon, she still hasn't eaten and she won't calm down. Nothing I have done will help her, she never ate those herbs you gave her either."

Blackstorm sighed and looked at Skyfeather. "I'm going to go try and talk to her." His mentor just nodded and Blackstorm followed Puddleclaw back to the nursery. Once again, her kits were sleeping and Silvermoon was just staring at them.

"I brought Blackstorm in here because I was worried about you." Puddleclaw mewed sheepishly.

"I'm fine, Puddleclaw." Silvermoon replied dryly.

"You're not, SIlvermoon." Puddleclaw urged. "Please, just let him help you." Puddleclaw turned her green eyes to Blackstorm. "We'll leave you be." She looked at Sagekit and Hailkit. "Come now, kits. Let's go celebrate your father's new position with some prey."

"Okay!" Sagekit and Hailkit seemed completely oblivious to the situation that was going on, they simply followed their mother out of the nursery and left nothing but Silvermoon, Blackstorm and the three kits.

"I said this earlier and I will say it again, you need to take care of yourself, Silvermoon." Blackstorm mewed, sitting down beside the entrance.

"I know..." Silvermoon whimpered, he had never seen a cat so torn apart, it broke his heart. "But I just *can't*, I know my kits need me to be strong but I don't know how I'll be able to continue without him. Ashblaze was my *everything*, I spent every day with him. From the day we were apprentices.

"When Thornstar took over he protected me, he promised me that everything would be okay. He would never let anything happen to me, and he never did. I've never loved anything in this life more than I loved him except," She broke off, staring at her kits. "Now I have to raise these kits by myself, I won't be able to share their accomplishments with him." Her body began to shake. "I love my kits so much, but how can I do this without him?" She looked up Blackstorm, her blue eyes pleading for answers.

Blackstorm wasn't really sure what to say, so he just spoke from his heart. "You'll be able to do it because you love them so much. You'll

do a great job because these kits are your world, and Ashblaze will watch them from StarClan. I know its not the same, but you can *do this*, Silvermoon, I know you can."

Silvermoon sighed, Blackstorm wasn't sure how but it seemed that his words were helping her. "I promise you that the next time I go to the Spirit Garden to talk to StarClan I will find Ashblaze and I will tell him how much you loved him and how much you miss him. I will tell him to watch over these kits every day, and to give you love and guidance from the stars."

Silvermoon's eyes flooded with emotion. "You would really do that for me?"

"Of course, Silvermoon." Blackstorm promised, and he really meant it. The half-moon wasn't so far away, and he would do everything he could to find Ashblaze in the ranks of StarClan. "And trust me, you honestly couldn't be a worse mother than mine was."

Silvermoon let out a tiny laugh. "Oh, Blackstorm. You really are an incredible medicine cat, I don't think AshClan could be more lucky to have you. Your mother is a fool for the choices she made." Blackstorm was genuinely moved by her words. Silvermoon was starting to lighten up, he knew it would take a very long time to recover from the loss of her mate, but knowing that Blackstorm was able to help just a little; mad everything worse.

"Will you take those herbs, please?" He questioned, nudging the herb bundle closer to her.

"Yes, Blackstorm." She leaned down and ate the herbs. "Thank you so much, she rested her head beside her kits and closed her eyes. "I hope I dream of him..."

Chapter 19

"I think you're ready to start light duties." Blackstorm mewed as he looked over Lilyclaw's belly wounds. They had been healing nicely and there was no sign of infection. "You should stick strictly to patrolling, however. No running or jumping too much." Lilyclaw sat up and looked at her belly.

"Thank you, Blackstorm." The tabby purred. "It doesn't even hurt anymore."

"I'm glad," He gave the wounds a final sniff. "But I still want you to come back here every morning and every night for new dressings."

"Will do." Lilyclaw stood up and turned out of the medicine cat den, leaving Skyfeather and Blackstorm alone. It had been five sunrises since the battle and AshClan was slowly recovering. Ravensong and Petalshine had moved back into the warriors den, both on very light duties in camp. Riverstar's wound was healing slowly, but healing nonetheless.

"You've been handling this battle well." Skyfeather mewed as he swept up some stray marigold petals with his tail. "It's impressive."

"It's my job." Blackstorm replied, staring at the messy nests and scattered herbs. These past few days had been utterly exhausting. Constantly dealing with stubborn, wounded warriors who thought they could return to their duties with wounds that were at constant risk of tearing open again. His paws were sticky with herbs and cobwebs and he was sick of dealing with warriors.

Despite all the frustration he felt, at the end of each day; Blackstorm felt incredibly satisfied. Each time one of this Clanmates thanked him for his hard work and whenever Skyfeather praised him for his treatments: it made Blackstorm love his job. *I guess that's what matters. My Clanmates need me, and I will be more than happy to serve them.*

"I'm proud of you." Skyfeather rested his tail on Blackstorm's pelt, Blackstorm turned to look at his mentor. "While we may not have agreed with this battle, it's still our duty to heal our Clanmates. I know that warriors can be arrogant and stone-headed but in the end, they need us."

"I know." Blackstorm sighed. "And I really do love doing this, I don't regret choosing this path."

"I'm glad that you had that choice." Skyfeather turned, his tail brushing Blackstorm's pelt. Blackstorm stared at his mentor, feeling a twinge of concern. *Skyfeather had a choice when he became a medicine cat, didn't he?* He knew that Skyfeather had stepped up to be AshClan's medicine cat when no other cat would, but it was his choice after all, wasn't it?

Blackstorm and Skyfeather continued on with their day, cleaning up the medicine cat den and straightening up the scraps and dried out herbs. It was nice to finally have some order to their den again.

For the first time since the battle, Blackstorm had nothing to do. The sun was fading from the sky and Blackstorm felt a longing in his heart. He hadn't seen Honeyfrost since the night before the battle. He wondered how SunClan was coping with the battle, he didn't know how badly the Clan had been wounded. He had heard rumors that Dawnstar lost a life, which resulted in Falconheart attacked Ashblaze and eventually killing him. Blackstorm really hoped that Honeyfrost was coping well.

Blackstorm had run into Honeyfrost the day before while the two were out collecting herbs, they didn't have any time to talk but they both agreed to meet tonight. Blackstorm was incredibly excited, but also incredibly nervous about this meeting. He didn't know what Honeyfrost would say about the battle. AshClan and SunClan had always been at odds, but it had been such a long time of peace broken by a bloody battle.

He waited all day until the sun had fallen from the sky and the moon and stars took its place to leave. Once again, Blackstorm made sure that Skyfeather was sound asleep before he left. He crept out of the camp and hurried towards the gathering hollow.

Blackstorm felt a mixture of joy and anxiety tearing his stomach apart as he grew closer to the gathering hollow. The skies were clear, the stars shimmering perfectly in the sky. *Is StarClan watching us?* Blackstorm wondered, he never really cared what StarClan thought about him and Honeyfrost. *If it feels right in my heart, how bad could it be?* Blackstorm knew that there were rules for a reason, but he just couldn't imagine a life with Honeyfrost.

For once, Blackstorm reached the gathering hollow before Honeyfrost but the other times he got here first; she never showed up. Blackstorm sat down beside the Great Stone, resting his tail over his paws and waiting anxiously for Honeyfrost to show up.

Blackstorm waited for a long while, twitching his paws and idly clawing at the grass. It was past moonhigh and he was really starting to worry that Honeyfrost wasn't able to show up or she didn't *want* to show up.

Right about when Blackstorm was starting to give up hope, he heard pawsteps coming from SunClan territory. He stood up and narrowed his eyes, trying to peer over the edge of the hollow. At long last Blackstorm saw a golden and white pelt rise over the hollow. Blackstorm eagerly crossed the hollow until he reached Honeyfrost.

"Sorry!" She apologized, the she-cat looked flustered and tired. "Pebblestep was worried about some wounds so she stayed up late taking care of them, she only fell asleep a little bit ago." Her breathing was heavy, she must have rushed here.

Blackstorm stepped closer, touching his nose to hers. "Don't worry, it's fine." He assured her. Blackstorm heard her breathing slow and felt her body relax. "I'm just glad that you're here."

"Me too." Honeyfrost breathed out, closing her eyes. Blackstorm did the same, breathing in her sweet, calming scent. *This is everything I ever needed.* After the two of them held the moment for a long while, Honeyfrost stepped. "How are the wounds in AshClan? How are Silvermoon and her kits coping?"

"Wounds are healing well, we've cleared out the medicine cat den

but not everyone is back on full duties. Silvermoon is struggling, and her kits miss their father and it will take a while to cope with the loss, but they'll make it." Blackstorm explained. "Our new deputy is Stormheart."

"That's good to hear." Honeyfrost mewed. "I always liked Stormheart, things are going well in SunClan too. Pebblestep is worried about Sedgefern's and Redclaw's wounds getting infected, that's why she stayed up late and my brother--" Honeyfrost cut herself off and flattened her ears. *Why was the mention of Falconheart upsetting her?*

"What about your brother?" Blackstorm inquired, Blackstorm never liked Falconheart. He was arrogant and full of himself, the worst kind of warrior.

"He hasn't been the same since he killed Ashblaze." Honeyfrost sighed. "I think he feels really guilty about about it." Blackstorm wasn't quite sure what to say, he was a little surprised to hear that Falconheart actually felt guilty. *I didn't know he was capable of it.* "I think this whole battle has gotten under everyone's pelts."

"Has it for you?" Blackstorm checked, hoping that Honeyfrost was doing alright.

"It's hard knowing that a cat I care so much about is living in a Clan that hates mine." Honeyfrost looked up to meet his gaze. "This won't be the last battle AshClan and SunClan have, and I know that we're medicine cats and not warriors but how can we pretend to hate each other when the exact opposite is true." She sighed and sat down, playing with a stray twig. "I want it to be easier."

"I do too." Blackstorm sat beside her. "This battle will still be a fresh wound between our Clans for a while and I can guarantee that there will be tension for even longer." Blackstorm looked at Honeyfrost, pressing his body against hers. "But we will find a way to live with this, I promise."

"Thank you." Honeyfrost closed her eyes, resting her head on Blackstorm's shoulder. "At least I have you to clear my head." Blackstorm rested his chin on the top of her head and intertwined

his tail with hers. *Everything is so perfect when I'm with her. There's no borders, not rivalries, no battles. Just the two of us.*

Honeyfrost and Blackstorm sat together in silence, sharing tongues and looking at the stars until dawn began to peak over the mountain tops. "We should go." Blackstorm said into her ear. "It's nearly dawn."

"I know." Honeyfrost sighed sadly, she was nearly asleep. Blackstorm stood up and helped her to his paws. "I just don't want to." They shared a caring look and touched noses one more time.

"So this is where you've been all night." Blackstorm's blood turned to ice, Honeyfrost's green eyes went wide. Her head snapped towards the side and saw the new cat that had spoken. Pebblestep stood at the top of the hollow, her blue eyes narrowed and staring down at the two medicine cats.

"I--" Blackstorm couldn't speak, there was nothing they could say. *Oh no.*

Chapter 20

Honeyfrost forgot how to breathe. Her chest was tight and her stomach was tying itself in knots. *This can't be happening.* Her mentor stood at the top of the hollow, staring down at the two medicine cats who stood still, frozen with shock and fear. "Pebblestep," Honeyfrost choked out, finally finding her voice after a painfully long moment of silence. "H-How long have you been there?"

"Long enough." Pebblestep mewed, sitting down at the top of the ridge. "However," She twitched her tail. "I've known about *this* for a while now."

"How?" Honeyfrost questioned. *When did she find out?*

"I'm half-blind with no sense of smell, I'm not stupid." Pebblestep's words were sharp, causing Honeyfrost to flinch, her ears flattened. Her blue eyes rested on Blackstorm. "Perhaps you should go home, Blackstorm."

Honeyfrost looked at Blackstorm, his body was trembling slightly. "A-Are you going to tell Skyfeather about this?"

Pebblestep shook her head slowly. "You're not my apprentice, if Skyfeather knows then he will talk to you about it. You are not my concern, she is." Pebblestep turned her gaze back to Honeyfrost.

Blackstorm lowered his head and looked at Honeyfrost, their gazes meeting for a brief moment. "I'm sorry." Blackstorm mouthed and turned away, breaking into a run towards AshClan territory, leaving Honeyfrost to face Pebblestep alone.

Honeyfrost didn't turn back to Pebblestep, she couldn't face her mentor right now. "Honeyfrost." Pebblestep's voice was quiet and filled with disappointment. Honeyfrost heard gentle pawsteps as the medicine cat slowly climbed down the edge of the hollow and approached Honeyfrost.

"Pebblestep, I'm so, so sorry." Honeyfrost squeaked out, forcing herself to meet her mentor's gaze. The sad disappointment in Pebblestep's eyes cut Honeyfrost deeper than any claw ever could. "I--"

Pebblestep shook her head. "Why are you apologizing?"

Honeyfrost was confused, flattening her ears. "B-because I broke both the warrior code *and* the medicine cat code."

"Yes, you did." Pebblestep sat down, looking up at the stars. "But you're far from the first one to do it." Honeyfrost said nothing, she didn't *what* she could possibly say in this situation. Her heart was tearing itself in half, she felt sick and she couldn't stop shaking. "I want you to know that I'm not mad at you."

"You should be." Honeyfrost stared at her paws. "I don't deserve to be a medicine cat." She closed her eyes, suddenly regretting so many choices. *Do I regret meeting Blackstorm?* Honeyfrost couldn't convince herself that she did.

"Is that what you think?" Pebblestep pried. "Do you think that I should kick you out of the medicine cat den? Or that Dawnstar should exile you from the Clan? Is that what you think is going to happen?"

"I don't know!" Honeyfrost cried, unable to contain her emotions and panic anymore. "All I know is that I broke the rules and I should be punished for it right?" She finally looked back up at Pebblestep. "That's what happens to cats that break the rules!" Honeyfrost turned away, sitting down and slumping over, so many emotions stormed inside her. *I don't know what to do.*

"Do you remember Poppyfur?" Honeyfrost looked over her shoulder in shock at Pebblestep. *What does this have to do with anything?*

"She was your mentor right?" Honeyfrost answered, figuring she should just go along with whatever Pebblestep was talking about.

"That's right." Pebblestep gave a slow nod. "Poppyfur originally started out as a warrior apprentice, but never wanted to become

one. After Feathernose died, Flowerstar convinced Poppyfur to follow her dream of becoming a medicine cat and she became Honeywing's apprentice." Honeyfrost blinked. *Why is she telling me this?* "Poppyfur loved her position as medicine cat apprentice, but it wasn't as easy as she originally thought. As an apprentice, Poppyfur met a LichenClan tom by the name of Branchfur.

"Poppyfur earned her full medicine cat name, but she started to sneak out of camp and meet Branchfur in silence. The two cats started a forbidden relationship, falling in love with each other despite being in different Clans and fighting their responsibilities. Honeywing figured it out, but put her faith in Poppyfur to realize her mistakes and hopefully choose her Clan over her love for Branchfur.

"Poppyfur told Flowerstar about her relationship and Flowerstar urged her to cut it off. Poppyfur felt guilty that she had fought so hard to become a medicine cat and she had fallen in love with another cat. Poppyfur finally agreed to Flowerstar's advice and ended her relationship with Branchfur.

"However, LichenClan came under the rule of Elmstar who was incredibly bloodthirsty. He wanted a war against the Clans and his first target was SunClan. A horrible battle broke out and caused the deaths of many cats. Honeywing went out to get more herbs but didn't return for a long time so Poppyfur went after her.

"It was out in the forest when Poppyfur encountered Branchfur and Honeywing. Branchfur demanded that Poppyfur make a choice, him or her Clan. Poppyfur chose her Clan, not knowing what Branchfur would do next. Enraged, Branchfur lashed out and killed Honeywing. Poppyfur was horrified, she ran back to camp and continued to treat the wounded." Honeyfrost's jaw dropped, she was told that Honeywing was killed by a LichenClan warrior but she had never been told the exact details.

"Poppyfur blamed herself for the death of Honeywing until the day that she died. It was a never ending torment for her, and yet no one but Flowerstar, and eventually myself knew. She was never punished by SunClan or StarClan, she punished *herself* by never forgiving herself for her mistake. She lived a long, hard life but ever

since that day she proved herself each and every time she helped her Clanmates." Pebblestep's story ended and Honeyfrost wasn't quite sure what to say. "I don't think that Blackstorm is anything like Branchfur, he's a medicine cat after all. However, I do think that if you don't make a choice now, you will have to make a harder choice in the future. A choice that may end up risking more than you first anticipated.

"Being a medicine cat is difficult, knowing that you'll never be able to have a mate or kits. When you're young you don't even think about it, you just want to help your Clan. Then you grow up and you see the cats around you falling in love and having kits."

Honeyfrost looked at Pebblestep, there was something deep inside her eyes. "Did you ever fall in love?"

Pebblestep nodded. "I did, but I fell in love with a cat from SunClan. I never acted on it though, I just focused on my duties and eventually the feelings faded. I still care for that cat very much, and always will, but I love being a medicine cat more." Pebblestep looked at Honeyfrost, holding an intense gaze. "Do you love being a medicine cat?"

"Yes," Honeyfrost looked up, dawn was approaching quickly. "More than anything, even though I've lost cats like Bramblepelt and Snakewhisker, I still love helping my Clanmates."

"Do you want to give up your title as a medicine cat and join AshClan or have Blackstorm join SunClan, giving up his title as medicine cat as well so the two of you can be together?" Honeyfrost flattened her ears, feeling a powerful ache in her heart.

"No." She said quietly. "I don't want that, Blackstorm loves being a medicine cat just as much as I do. I don't know what I wanted from this relationship, I love the way I feel when I'm with him. He's been a place for me to feel safe and relaxed when my entire world feels like it's crumbling around me."

Pebblestep moved closer to Honeyfrost, wrapping her tail around Honeyfrost's shoulder. "I know how you feel, it can be hard being a medicine cat. Every cat relies on you to keep them and their loved

ones alive. Like I said, I'm not mad at you. I'm worried about you, because I know that in the end you'll end up getting your heart broken."

Honeyfrost knew that Pebblestep was right, she knew since she started seeing Blackstorm that someday it would have to come to an end, she just didn't want it to. She and Blackstorm were so involved that the thought of not seeing him every night was enough to completely shatter her heart.

"You're my apprentice and I care so much for you, more than you could ever imagine. Dawnstar is one of my best friends and having the opportunity to teach you the world that I love, and watching you grow up into such an amazing medicine cat has been such an honor. I hate to see you struggling so much, and I just want to help you."

Honeyfrost sighed. "I know what I have to do." She kept her voice low and quiet. "I just don't know how I'm going to do it."

"You'll find the way." Pebblestep stood up, looking at the crisp, dawn sky. "Come on, Honeyfrost. Let's go home."

Chapter 21

Yowls filled the air, the scent of blood filled the air and splatters covered the forest floor. Falconheart's body stung with the deep wounds that traced his body. He saw his mother, lying the forest floor, lifeless. The cat that towered over her was Ashblaze, the AshClan deputy. Blood covered his paws and his amber eyes were void of any emotion, just empty amber pools.

"Murderer!" Falconheart cried out and charged towards the deputy, ready to defend his mother. His body slammed into Ashblaze's and instantly the tabby's body crumbled. Falconheart stepped back, blood poured from Ashblaze's neck, pooling on the forest floor. Falconheart's heart twisted in horror. *I barely touched him!*

Falconheart's body froze, Ashblaze's eyes went from amber to black. Empty and soulless. A glow formed at Ashblaze's body and Falconheart watched as the tom's spirit rose. "Why would you do this, Falconheart?" The deputy questioned, his voice echoing through the trees. The fighting around them stopped. "You're a monster!"

"No!" Falconheart cried, closing his eyes. "I'm not a monster!"

"You're a killer! A filthy murderer!" Falconheart shook his head, it was no longer Ashblaze's voice speaking. He heard Dawnstar, Sedgefern, Honeyfrost, Lionclaw and all the cats he loved and cared about.

"I'm not a monster!"

Falconheart shot up in his nest, panting heavily. His chest felt tight and his pelt burned. It was still dark in the warrior's den, probably long before dawn had arrived. Falconheart couldn't get the image of Ashblaze's body out of his mind. It had been several days since the battle, and the guilt continued to eat at him.

I need fresh-air. Falconheart thought, the clustered den suffocating

him. Falconheart stood up and climbed out of the warrior's den. He stepped into camp and breathed in the fresh, nighttime air. He felt that he could breathe better, but the fog in his head was still thick, giving him constant headaches and clouding his judgement.

Falconheart had caught the attention of Yarrowtail who was sitting guard at the head of camp. The small gray tom looked over at Falconheart with concern in his soft green eyes. "You doing alright?"

Falconheart nodded. "Just a bad dream." He told the warrior. "I needed some fresh-air."

"Want to talk about it?" Yarrowtail questioned. "I know we're not necessarily close, but your mother is one of my best friends."

"I don't know." Falconheart flattened his ears. "It's hard to explain what's going on." He gently twitched his tail.

"Is it about Ashblaze?" Yarrowtail questioned, giving Falconheart a skeptical yet worried glance.

Falconheart opened his mouth, trying to come up with a different excuse, but he knew it was no use. He was certain that his problems were obvious to every single cat in the Clan. "Yeah, it is."

"Look, Falconheart," Yarrowtail brushed his tail across Falconheart's pelt. "You can't let this tear your apart forever. Ashblaze was a warrior, he took the same oath that you did. We vowed to protect the Clans at the cost of our lives, Ashblaze died fighting for his Clan. Just as Bramblepelt did, it's how we warriors live our lives."

Falconheart stared at his paws, not at all comforted by Yarrowtail's words. *Ashblaze wasn't just a nameless warrior. He had a family, a mate, and kits who loved him. When Bramblepelt died all of his kits were so torn apart.*

"Thanks, Yarrowtail." Falconheart stood up, wanting the warrior to feel like he helped despite the fact that Falconheart didn't feel even slightly better. "I'm going to go try and sleep."
"Glad I could help." Yarrowtail purred. Falconheart knew that

Yarrowtail meant well, but he just couldn't shake the guilt that was raging inside his stomach. Falconheart wasn't sure if he would ever be able to shake this feeling.

He curled up in his nest in the warrior's den, but he didn't sleep. Falconheart thought of Ashblaze's and Silvermoon's kits; Mistkit, Dewkit and Slatekit. He had traveled with them on the journey when they weren't even a moon old, but now they were two moons old. They would grow up without their father, Falconheart couldn't imagine life without his father.

He looked up to Lionclaw, his strength, his loyalty and his love and dedication to Dawnstar and all of SunClan. Lionclaw looked at Dawnstar like she was the sun, providing light to the entire forest. *I don't know what I would do without either of them, I don't even want to think about it.* Falconheart closed his eyes, trying to swallow the pain. *And now those three kits have to live without their father.*

Falconheart fell in and out of sleep for the rest of the night, waking up at dawn when a few cats began to stir. He opened his heavy eyes and watched the cats set for the dawn patrol leave the den. Falconheart didn't get up, but he couldn't fall back asleep even though he wanted to.

Falconheart stayed in his nest for a while longer until he grew sick of lying there with his thoughts. He rose to his paws and left the den where life in the SunClan camp was starting to begin. Bluekit, Windkit and Snowkit had already began play wrestling outside the nursery while Cherryleaf watched happily.

Sandfoot, Rainears and Crowfur were sharing a large piece of prey outside the elder's den, Cloudspots and Rosewind were instructing Hollypaw and Burnpaw for their day's duties, and several warriors were gathered around Cinderflame for tasks.

Falconheart figured that's what he should do as well, so he quickly trotted towards the SunClan deputy as she relayed duties. "The sunhigh patrol will be lead by Applespots and will have Petalbreeze, Flashtail, Flamepetal and Redclaw. Next I want a hunting patrol near the badger den with Brackenpelt, Sedgefern, Snowtail, Earthpelt and Falconheart." Falconheart found Sedgefern in the

group of warriors, she met his gaze and looked very excited that the two of them were hunting together.

I have to admit. Falconheart thought. *Hunting with Sedgefern sounds really nice.* He lifted his head slightly and once Cinderflame finished, went up to Sedgefern whose green eyes sparkled with excitement.

"We get to go hunting together!" Sedgefern purred. "You're always the best to hunt with, you're so good at it."
"Heh," Falconheart's pelt burned. "Thank you." He didn't really feel touched by her compliment, he didn't feel that he was the best at anything right now.

"Why don't we head out?" Brackenpelt suggested. "It's such a beautiful day, I bet the prey will just be jumping into our paws."

"I know you're a good hunter but surely you can at least put some effort into hunting." Snowtail teased and she, Brackenpelt and Earthpelt shared a laugh. Beside Falconheart, Sedgefern let out a quiet chuckle as well but Falconheart just couldn't find his sense of humor.

He travelled in silence with his hunting mates, he felt Sedgefern look at him from time to time but his eyes focused on the forest ahead. Brackenpelt *had* been right about the weather, it was a beautiful day outside. The sun was shining over head, but it wasn't extremely hot.

The foliage rustled softly, spreading the scent of trees, grass and herbs. Falconheart could hear prey scurrying through the undergrowth, and the calls of birds in the distance. *It's so lively.* For a moment he thought about their old home in its dying moments. Rotten trees, decaying plants and a sharp scarcity of prey. Falconheart wished he could appreciate this more, but every thought was interrupted by the images of Ashblaze's dead body. *Get out of my head!* Falconheart pleaded, but to no avail.

The hunting patrol reached the collapsed badger den where Brackenpelt stopped. Falconheart withheld a sigh, the last time he had been here was when he played with Sedgefern. *I wish I could go*

back to then, before the battle. "We can split up here," Brackenpelt began. "Snowtail and Earthpelt you go hunt towards the AshClan border, just not too close. Be careful, we don't want any patrol thinking you're trying to steal anything." There was an awkward nod from Snowtail, since the battle AshClan had been completely silent. SunClan knew they were patrolling the border, but they hadn't seen any patrols.

"Sedgefern and Falconheart you can head towards the base of the mountains, try hunting around that big, twisted oak tree. It's a hot spot for squirrel."

"Can do." Sedgefern purred, stepping slightly closer to Falconheart. He looked at the gray she-cat, feeling his heart begin to race a little faster. *Maybe I can finally get my mind off of Ashblaze by hunting with her.*

"I will hunt around here, the birds are active today so I'm gonna try and snatch a few." Once Brackenpelt was done giving orders, the hunting patrol split up. Falconheart and Sedgefern began their walk towards the mountains.

"So," Sedgefern began, somewhat awkwardly as the two of them trekked through the trees. "Excited to catch some prey? I be we catch more than Brackenpelt, Snowtail and Earthpelt *combined.*" Her green eyes sparkled, Falconheart looked at her. He tried to get excited, and any other time he would've jumped right on with the challenge, but Falconheart just couldn't find the excitement inside of him, so he forced it.

"I don't doubt it." He managed to make himself looked cheerful and cocky, which usually came naturally to him. *Will I ever be the same?* Falconheart wondered. "Let's get started, we have no time to waste."

Falconheart lifted his muzzle, closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of the forest. He could smell the herbs, the trees and the scent of prey carried on the wind. He strained his ears, listening for any sounds of prey. He caught the scent of squirrel, opened his eyes and began tracking it.

Sedgefern stayed close behind, following with silent pawsteps.

Falconheart ducked low to the ground, spotting a pile of squirrel droppings. *I'm close.* He focused harder, following the scent trail until he spotted the bright red creature sniffing at the base of a large oak tree. It scratched at the ground, looking for food.

Falconheart took a silent inhale of breath, flexing his claws and getting ready to pounce. Falconheart crept closer, the squirrel was just one leap away. Falconheart readied himself to jump--and froze.

Ashblaze's lifeless amber eyes filled Falconheart's mind, he saw blood pooling on the ground and his guilt came tearing through him once more. *No!* Falconheart shut his eyes, forcing the images away and giving a mighty leap. He landed short of the squirrel, kicking up a flurry of twigs and grass, the squirrel took off up the tree and vanished into the thick leaves.

Falconheart landed on his chest, bumping his chin off the ground and twisting his hind paw. His pelt was suddenly on fire, Sedgefern had witnessed that whole thing. *I did better than that on my first day as an apprentice!* Falconheart thought painfully. *Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!*

Falconheart wanted to melt into the floor and never have to speak to Sedgefern about what just happened to him. "Uh..." Sedgefern spoke from behind Falconheart. "Are you alright?" Falconheart swallowed his pride and stood up, leaving his dignity on the forest floor. He turned around to look at Sedgefern, she had both confusion and concern written all over her face.

"Yeah," Falconheart looked away, unable to handle the look in her eyes. "Just...slipped." He flattened his ears.

"I've seen cats slip, and it never looks like that." Sedgefern argued. "You froze, and then just jumped like a blind fox in a fit. Your form was perfect and then it...wasn't." She took a step closer to Falconheart, his entire body tensed. "You've been acting strange lately." She pointed. "Ever since the battle, is this about Ashblaze?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Falconheart growled, not meaning to sound as hostile as he did.

"It's okay, Falconheart." Sedgefern wasn't deterred by his tone, she

moved even closer. "You're not the only warrior to--"

"It's not okay!" Falconheart shouted, tearing away from Sedgefern. "It's *not* okay! I *killed* another cat!" Another image flashed in Falconheart's mind, it wasn't Ashblaze, it was Hornet. The rogue who had kidnapped Honeyfrost, who had led the coyotes to the Clans. "I've killed two cats." He sat down, slumping his shoulders. He didn't know why he had never thought of Hornet before, maybe it was because he was a rogue.

I still killed him. I took his life, even if Primroseheart hated him. He winced as even more guilt clawed its way inside Falconheart, tearing at his heart. *I can't handle this.* "I've killed two cats, I've ended *two* lives."

"Falconheart," Sedgefern began to speak again, but Falconheart didn't want to listen. She would say the exact same thing that every other cat said. She would tell him that it was self-defense, a warrior takes an oath, the same stupid words that only made him feel worse. There was only one cat who would tell him any different, a cat he hadn't talked to since the battle.

Falconclaw. Falconheart lifted his head suddenly. *I heard his voice when I was fighting Hornet, and again when I was fighting Ashblaze. He* wanted *me to kill them.* His heart twisted. *Nightheart was right.*

"Falconheart!" Sedgefern's sharp mew snapped Falconheart out of his thoughts, he looked at her, suddenly feeling even more complex emotions about Ashblaze's death. "I can't help but feel that there's something else on your mind." She mewed, lowering her voice.

"No." Was all Falconheart said, it was a straight up lie, but there was no way he would ever tell Sedgefern about Falconclaw and the dark forest.

Sedgefern narrowed her eyes. "Are you sure about that? Because you still haven't explained what happened with Nightheart during the battle."

Falconheart's chest tightened. "We had some fights when we were younger, and the tension is still there. She's the one who gave me

the scar on my nose when I snuck out to fight as kit."

"There's more to it than that!" Sedgefern wasn't believing anything he was telling her, he wished that she would just drop it. He hated having to lie to her, but if he told her about his trainings with a murderer then she would never talk to him again. "Tell me the truth, Falconheart. *Now.*"

The intensity of her gaze cut deep into Falconheart, he took a deep breath. "There's just some things that I can't tell you, Sedgefern." He looked away, not wanting to even imagine the look in her eyes.

"*Why?*" She demanded, her voice straining. "I thought we were friends, close friends! You can tell me anything, Falconheart. I promise."

"No, I can't." Falconheart lowered his voice, through the corner of his eye, Falconheart saw Sedgefern wince.

"You can't? Or you *won't?*" Her caring tone had shifted into a hostile one, her voice was sharp and cut Falconheart deep. "I'm trying to help you, Falconheart. So you don't go blindly chasing after squirrels or have nightmares all night." Falconheart looked at her suddenly. *How did she know?* "Yeah, I noticed. I noticed because I *care* about you." She let out a pained sigh and turned away. "I thought that we had something special here, Falconheart." Her voice trembled, she was struggled to keep her voice steady. "But I guess I was wrong." Without another word, and without giving Falconheart a chance to reply, Sedgefern vanished into the trees.

Falconheart was left alone in the forest, his heart breaking. A new guilt creeped its way into his head, the guilt of hurting one of the cats he cared about the most. *Great.* Falconheart stood up. *Way to go, you've successfully ruined everything you cared about.* Falconheart felt rage building up inside him, a burning rage towards himself. "You're such an *idiot!*" Falconheart cried out, lashing out and raked his claws against the trunk of an oak tree.

His claws slashed at the bark, sending splinters spraying across the forest floor. He stood there, panting heavily. His heart ached and his mind was torn apart with guilt, sadness and anger. Falconheart

knew exactly where all of his problems were coming from, the one cat who had taught him to be the way that he was, who had driven him to kill.

It's time I had a word with Falconclaw.

Chapter 22

"Is that all *you caught?*" Brackenpelt questioned, looking at Falconheart's two skinny squirrels. "Honestly, Falconheart I thought you were a great hunter."

"It was slow." Falconheart explained, completely avoiding Sedgefern who had returned just before him.

"Also I thought I told you two to hunt together?" Brackenpelt looked over the two warriors. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing happened." Sedgefern spoke before Falconheart. "We just decided to go to two different spots to cover more ground." She had caught more than him, but only by one extra squirrel.

"At least you two got *something*." Brackenpelt was clearly annoyed, but the other three had caught enough prey to make-up for Falconheart's failure. The patrol headed back towards camp, Sedgefern walked near Earthpelt at the front of the patrol and Falconheart stayed alone in the back.

I should get used to this. Falconheart thought, his heart twisting painfully. He watched Sedgefern, she wasn't talking either, but she certainly wasn't acknowledging his presence. *Why did I have to ruin things with her?* He shook his head, now wasn't the time for fussing over Sedgefern. He had a much bigger plan in mind for later tonight.

He would return to the Dark Forest and challenge Falconclaw, it was *his* fault that Falconheart had been turned into such a violent cat. *He made me into a killer, and I'm going to make him pay.* That's when Falconheart got a curious question floating through his mind. *Can you kill a cat that's already dead?*

Falconheart continued on with his day, doing whatever duties he needed to around camp until it was time to rest for the night. He did his best to ignore the hateful glares from Sedgefern, and curled

up in his nest; which was no longer beside hers. She had moved in between him and Petalbreeze.

Falconheart closed his eyes, wishing to wake up in the Dark Forest. He slowed his breath and focused on where he wanted to be. After what seemed like an eternity, Falconheart slipped into sleep.

For a while, it was only darkness. He saw flashes of blood and terrible scenes from the battle, but when he opened his eyes he wasn't in the warrior's den, he was in the Dark Forest. Falconheart took a deep breath. *Finally.* He puffed out his chest, trying to make himself look big. He flexed his claws, preparing for a fight. "Falconclaw!" He shouted, his voice echoing through the dead trees.

"My dear, Falconheart." The low voice of Falconclaw spoke from a distance away, and the dark tabby stepped out of the shadows. "Its been a while, hasn't it."

"I'm surprised you didn't drag me to this dead wasteland sooner." Falconheart raised his lip at his shadowy mentor.

"I wanted to let you recover after your victory." Falconclaw sat down, resting his tail across his paws. "I assume that's what you wanted to talk about, yes?"

"It *wasn't* a victory!" Falconheart spat. "I took another warrior's life, I don't consider that a win."

"AshClan retreated from their attack, leaving SunClan on top. That's how victories work." Falconclaw's tone grew an edge to it, he twitched his ears.

"Dawnstar lost a life and AshClan lost their deputy, I don't call that a victory for either side."

"Why are you so upset over Ashblaze's death anyway?" Falconclaw questioned, narrowing his deep amber eyes. "You defended your mother."

"I *killed* another cat!" Falconheart shouted. "I'm *not* a killer! I'm not like *you!"* He lashed his tail, claws ripping at the rotten forest floor beneath his paws.

"Is that so?" Falconclaw stood up, his eyes turning dark. "Is that *really* what you think?"

"It's exactly what I think." Falconheart growled, facing Falconclaw head on. "You trained me to be like this. Ashblaze shouldn't have died, I *never* wanted this."

"So you're blaming his death on me." Falconclaw shook his head slowly. "I thought you were smarter than that, Falconheart." The tabby stepped closer. "I don't recall being on that battlefield, ripping Ashblaze's throat open." Falconheart tensed, baring his teeth as Falconclaw began to walk circles around him. "You think that you can just get rid of your guilt by pushing the blame onto me?"

Falconheart's feelings suddenly became conflicted, he opened his mouth but couldn't find the words to speak. "You think that if you blame me then you won't feel bad anymore? That you can just go back to the way things were." Falconclaw quickly rushed up on Falconheart, making him jump back. "Well you *can't.* You can't just go back in time and stop yourself from killing Ashblaze, there is no resetting here. He is *dead* and *you killed him.*"

Falconheart stepped back even farther, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "Shut up." He growled.

"Killers aren't *made*, Falconheart. They're *born.*" Falconclaw followed Falconheart, all of Falconheart's courage was suddenly seeping away. *What's happening to me?* Falconheart was backed against a tree, he couldn't move any father. Falconclaw leaned in, his foul breath just barely away from Falconheart's face. "And another thing you were wrong about."

Falconheart wasn't prepared for Falconclaw's attack, the tabby suddenly sank his claws into Falconheart's shoulders and slammed him into the ground. "You *are* me."

Falconheart struggled under his grip, his mind and body unable to fight back. "No," He choked out. "I am *nothing* like you."

"Oh, yes you are." Falconclaw sank his teeth into Falconheart's scruff and slammed his body into a thick tree, sending leaves to the

ground. "You killed Ashblaze, now his mate will have to raise his kits without him. They'll grow up without knowing their father, they will never see him at their warrior ceremony. You are a *monster. Just. Like. Me.*"

"No!" Falconheart cried out, he refused to listen. *I'm not like Falconclaw. I'm not a monster! I'm not a monster!*

Falconheart shot up in his nest, struggling to catch his breath. He scrambled to his paws, his mind still trapped in the Dark Forest. The den was stuffy, he couldn't breathe and his lungs burned. His body was sore from Falconclaw's attack, and his mind was broken from Falconclaw's words.

"What in the name of StarClan is wrong with you?" Falconheart realized, as his mind focused on the world around him, that he had woken up half the warriors den. Icepetal was sitting up with annoyance in her blue eyes.

"Were you fighting an army of badgers in your sleep?" Adderstrike grumbled, still half-asleep.

"I-I'm sorry," He flattened his ears, feeling his pelt burn. He couldn't help but notice that Sedgefern was looking at him as well. "I just need some air, sorry everyone." He rushed out of the den, ignoring Goldenleaf who was sitting guard and ran into the forest.

I can't take this anymore. His mind was exhausted, his body felt broken and he just wanted to run into the mountains, never to return. Falconheart ran as fast as he possibly could into the forest without looking back. *I ruin everything. I killed Ashblaze, I hurt Sedgefern and now my nightmares are effecting my Clanmates.*

Falconheart's paw caught on a root that jutted out of the ground, he came to a violent stop and was thrust forward. Falconheart hit the forest floor hard, tumbling head over tail down a slope. Rocks cut into his fur and twigs poked him in the eye.

Falconheart came to a stop, lying in the middle of the forest. He closed his eyes, thankful that no one saw him. He laid in the grass, not wanting to move. *Everything is my fault.* Falconheart thought,

feeling completely broken.

How do I live with this guilt? Falconheart asked himself, wishing that somehow he would get an answer. He knew that he couldn't just make his problems go away, he had to do something about them...but he didn't know how.

Challenging Falconclaw certainly wasn't the way to do it. Falconheart wished he could claw his own ears off, going to the Dark Forest had only made things worse. Falconheart opened his eyes and rolled onto his back, staring up at the stars.

"What do you think?" He questioned the empty sky. "Do you hate me for what I did? Will I end up in the Dark Forest like Falconclaw? There was no response, Falconheart didn't think he would get one, but the silence made him feel truly alone.

He wanted Sedgefern, he wanted to talk to her, but he had ruined that too. Falconheart knew he couldn't change the past, but maybe he could fix things for the future? Would it possible to fix his relationship with Sedgefern? Falconheart wanted to try, if nothing else he *had* to try. He just needed to figure out where to start.

Chapter 23

Nightheart stretched out in the sun, small patch of sunlight that remaind in camp, shining between the darker clouds above. It wasn't long before rain was drenching the forest and she wanted to enjoy as much sunlight as she could before that happened. Most AshClan cats were preparing for the upcoming storm, hunting and reinforcing dens to make sure they could handle any amount of rain that fell.

AshClan had fallen back onto a slight sense of normalcy since Ashblaze's death, but there was still a dark shadow that clung to the hearts of most AshClan cats, especially Silvermoon. She was working hard to care of her kits, but every cat in the Clan knew that she was struggling, and probably would for a very long time. Nightheart had never lost someone close to her, but she assumed that you never really stopped missing fallen loved ones, you just find a way to live without them.

"Nightheart!" At the call of her name, Nightheart lifted her head and looked for the source. It came from Stormheart who stood in front of Riverstar's den. "Go out hunting with Lilyclaw, Rabbitspring and Primroseheart. The patrol that's out now should be returning soon, I want as much prey in this camp as possible before the rain hits."

Nightheart gave the new deputy a nod and stood up, quickly missing the patch of sunlight she had made her own. She looked around the camp for the cats she was supposed to hunting with. Lilyclaw was visiting her granddaughters at the nursery and Rabbitspring and Primroseheart were having a conversation with Dustfall.

Feeling her heart grow light at the sight of Rabbitspring, Nightheart quickly trotted across camp to the others. "Rabbitspring, Primroseheart." She mewed, getting the attention of the two she-cats. Rabbitspring looked away from her brother towards Nightheart and her eyes instantly softened, making Nightheart's heart skip a beat. "Stormheart wants us and Lilyclaw to go out

hunting."

"Alright." Primroseheart stood up. "I'll talk to you later, Dustfall."

"Okay." Dustfall stood up quickly as well, looking somewhat awkward. Nightheart remembered what Rabbitspring had said about Dustfall having a crush on Primroseheart. She had no doubt in her mind about that. *I hope I don't act like that around Rabbitspring!* Nightheart liked to think she had a lot more composure around Rabbitspring, even if everytime they were together her heart was beating faster than her paws could run.

"Let's grab Lilyclaw and let's head out." Primroseheart mewed, waving her tail at Dustfall as the three she-cats walked away towards the nursery. Once they had pulled Lilyclaw away from Puddleclaw and her kits, the group set out wards the north border.

At Riverstar's orders, the cats of AshClan had been told to be incredibly wary of the SunClan border. They did their best not to be seen by SunClan cats, Riverstar didn't want another fight to break out.

Nightheart wondered how long it would last, AshClan couldn't hide from SunClan forever, they would have to go to gatherings and eventually two patrols would run into each other. The whole battle had left a sour taste on Nightheart's tongue, she constantly thought about how SunClan accused AshClan stealing prey, but AshClan had accused them first. *I know what I saw.* Nightheart reminded herself constantly, but Dawnstar just didn't seem like a liar. Dawnstar was a good cat, she was brave and kind and loyal to her Clan. *Unlike her kits.* Dawnstar snorted, thinking of the violent Falconheart and Honeyfrost who broke both the medicine cat and warrior codes to be with Blackstorm.

Anger rose up inside Nightheart once more as she thought about those two, she had to force it to the back of her mind so she could focus on hunting. "You doing alright, Nightheart?" Rabbitspring spoke closely beside her. "You look tense, and you haven't spoken much since we headed out."

"I'm fine." Nightheart assured Rabbitspring purred, then stopped

walking. She looked around the forest and breathed in the air. "We could probably split up now." She stated. "Lilyclaw and Primroseheart, you two go hunt near the base of the mountain, Rabbitspring and I will head towards the border."

Primroseheart have a slight snicker. "Alright, Nightheart." There was a playful glint in her blue eyes. Lilyclaw also let out a *mrrow* of laughter, flicking her tail.

"What?" Nightheart narrowed her eyes, she knew that the laughter was directed at her, but she didn't know why. "Something wrong?"

"Not at all." Lilyclaw purred and turned around with Primroseheart. "You two have fun now." Together, the tabby she-cats vanished into the pine trees towards the mountains leaving Nightheart flustered and confused.

"That was weird." Nightheart mumbled, then turned to Rabbitspring. "Let's just go hunt."

"Okay." Rabbitspring didn't seem to understand the laughter either, she just purred and the two of them walked into the trees together.

"I think you were right about Primroseheart and Dustfall." Nightheart mewed once she was sure Primroseheart couldn't hear them.

"I don't doubt it." Rabbitspring replied, climbing over a large stone. "He constantly fawns after her, and he's also spending a lot of time around the nursery. I think he wants kits."

"He's pretty young for that." Nightheart pointed out. "You guys have only been warriors for a moon, *I* don't even want kits yet, I don't if I ever will."

"I don't know if I won't ever want kits, but I certainly don't want any now." Rabbitspring explained, and for a moment, Nightheart was relieved that Rabbitspring didn't want kits, then she stopped. *Wait, why am I thinking about that? It's not like Rabbitspring and I are mates or anything, and we couldn't even have kits together if that was the case...*

However, the thought of being mates with Rabbitspring made Nightheart's belly fill with butterflies. She looked at Rabbitspring, she was beautiful, kind and caring. *It wouldn't be the worst thing...*

"Nightheart!" Rabbitspring's voice shattered her thoughts, Nightheart's pelt began to burn.

"Oh, sorry." She licked the fur on her chest awkwardly.

"What happened?" Rabbitspring asked, walking up to Nightheart. "You feeling alright?"

Nightheart nodded. "Just got lost in thought, don't worry about it." She shook the thoughts away. *Now is not the time to think about it.* "Let's get to hunting."

Nightheart and Rabbitspring had a very successful hunt, Nightheart caught two squirrels and a shrew and Rabbitspring caught three squirrels. When they met up with Lilyclaw and Primroseheart the two of them had caught two squirrels, two mice and a sparrow. "I think that Stormheart will be happy with what we've brought back."

"Me too." Lilyclaw agreed. "Let's get it back to camp before this rain hits." Nightheart looked up at the sky, the clouds were dark and threatening. The scent of rain filled the air, a downpour wasn't far away.

As they walked back to camp Nightheart noticed how close she walking to Rabbitspring without realizing it. Their pelts were nearly brushing, Nightheart's pelt began to burn once more. How many other things did she do without realizing? And no matter what she did, she couldn't get Rabbitspring out of her mind. *She's driving me crazy, and that's not necessarily a bad thing.*

Once they returned to camp and deposited their prey on the fresh-kill pile. "I'm gonna go give some prey to the elders." Rabbitspring mewed, turning to Nightheart. "I'll meet up with you after okay?"

"Alright." Nightheart purred and watched the she-cat carry two of the largest squirrels to the elder's den. Behind Nightheart, Primroseheart and Lilyclaw began laughing. She whipped her head

around to see the two she-cats walking away, their heads were lowered and they whispered to each other.

Nightheart could barely hear them, but she definitely heard her name as well as Rabbitspring's. She then realized what they were laughing about, they were gossiping about Nightheart and Rabbitspring the same way that Nightheart and Rabbitspring gossiped about Primroseheart and Dustfall.

She realized now just how obvious her feelings were to everyone else in the Clan, she always stayed close to Rabbitspring and did almost every single thing she could with her. *Did Rabbitspring notice? Do I want her to?* Nightheart felt confused and flustered, she didn't know what she wanted or what Rabbitspring wanted. *Should I tell her? What if she doesn't actually feel the same way?*

"Nightheart?" Once again, another cat caught in her a torrent of thoughts, but this time it was Haresong. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Nightheart looked at the spotted she-cat, tensing up slightly. *Does she have something to say about Rabbitspring? She is Haresong's daughter after all, maybe she doesn't approve of me liking her daughter.* "Sure." Nightheart gave the short answer, her voice dry.

"I, along with most other cats in AshClan have noticed you and Rabbitspring." Nightheart was pretty sure her entire pelt was on fire, she did her best not to completely avoid Haresong's gaze. "At first I thought you two were just close friends. You helped Rabbitspring find confidence when she was an apprentice, so naturally it would bring the two of you closer, however as you two got older I realized something. The relationship between Petalshine and Foxfeather is a close friendship, what you two have is something more."

"We uh," Nightheart cleared her throat. "We're not m-mates or anything, Haresong."

"But you want to be, don't you?" Nightheart's eyes darted to the ground, she couldn't bring herself to answer.

"I really don't mind, Nightheart." Nightheart wa surprised at Haresong's kind words, she found the strength to look back up at her Clanmate. "Like I said, you helped Rabbitspring gain confidence when the rest of us failed to do so. Once you started helping her train she became a whole new cat, she was able to flourish and spread her wings. She found herself, and you helped her do that."

"S-She's an amazing cat." Nightheart admitted. "I never thought I would end up feeling this way, I just wanted to help out a Clanmate but she's always on my mind..." Nightheart's voice trailed off, she should be telling *Rabbitspring* this, not Haresong.

"She really is, after Timberpaw's death all of my kits and myself suffered. I still feel a giant hole in my heart that will never be filled, it was the same when I lost their father. Grasstail never got to meet his kits, and it breaks my heart." She shook her head. "But that's off topic, the point is: I want my kits to be happy, and if Rabbitspring finds her happiness with you then I'm okay with that."

"Thanks, Haresong." Nightheart felt slightly awkward still, but also felt better about the whole situation.

"Two she-cats being mates *is* a little uncommon, but it's not unheard of. I heard stories of Goldenstar, Lionstar's mother, falling in love Ivystar when she was her deputy. I don't know if they ever officially became mates, but their affection was obvious."

"I never knew that." Nightheart never knew Lionstar, he had been killed before Nightheart was born, but she had heard many stories. She knew that he and Riverstar were best friends and he was respected leader.

"Just take this advice: don't let others judge you, if being with Rabbitspring is what will make you happy, then just be happy." Haresong purred, Nightheart felt genuinely touched by her words. *What I wouldn't give for a mother like her.*

Haresong brushed her tail across Nightheart's pelt and crossed the camp to talk with Leafdawn and Primroseheart. As she left, Rabbitspring returned from the elder's den. "Were you just talking to my mother?" Rabbitspring questioned, her eyes confused. She

looked towards Haresong.

Nightheart thought for a moment, she knew that she needed to tell Rabbitspring how she felt, but she didn't think now was the right moment. "Yeah, she was just talking to me about our hunt." Nightheart knew she was lying, but she would tell the truth in due time.

There was a low rumble of thunder overhead and Nightheart felt a cold drop of rain hit her nose. She looked up, the storm was staring. "We should get inside the den before we get drenched." She suggested.

"I agree." Rabbitspring purred and the two she-cats quickly rushed into the warriors den as the rain fell faster, they laid down in their nests and spent the rest of the day talking, until eventually the two of them fell into a peaceful rest. Nightheart felt so at peace, breathing in the sweet scent of the cat she cared about the most and listening to the rain patter against the roof of the den, Nightheart was feeling true bliss.

Chapter 24

When Nightheart woke up she wasn't in the warrior den, her fur stood on end and she could smell the rotting trees of the Dark Forest. She dug her claws into the rotting soil. She hadn't been to this miserable place since her fight with Falconheart, she had made her feelings about this forest and Thornstar very clear.

"Why am I back here?" Nightheart demanded, shouting into the shadows. "Show yourself, Thornstar." She growled. Sure enough, the former AshClan leader stepped out of the trees.

"It's good to see you too, Nightheart." Thornstar flicked his tail. "I thought you'd be happier to be back here, it's been far too long since your last training session."

"You mean after you almost made Falconheart kill me?" Nightheart lashed her tail and flattened her ears, baring her teeth.

"No," Thornstar sat down. "That was Falconclaw's idea, not mine. He was always eager to show up those around him. I want us to return to the old training sessions, just you and me."

"Not happening." Nightheart said sternly. "I'm done with the Dark Forest, I'm done with this training and I'm done with *you.*"

"Is that what you think?" Thornstar took a threatening step forward. "You *really* think it's that easy?" Nightheart tensed, she braced herself for a possible attack. She didn't like the way that Thornstar was talking. "I helped make you the warrior that you are today, it's because of me that you're as talented and brave as you are. I certainly did more than that other mentor of yours."

Nightheart's fur bristled. "Don't you dare talk about Wheatwhisker like that! He taught me more than you ever could."

"Oh really? That's why you know techniques that only *I* taught you, techniques that have saved lives and won fights."

Nightheart shook her head. "Shut up! I told you that I'm done with the Dark Forest, I won't be coming back here." She closed her eyes, willing herself to be out of the disgusting, rotting and lifeless forest.

"Well if that's what you really want," Thornstar sighed, Nightheart ignored him. "I suppose I could just find a new apprentice...Rabbitspring seems like a good choice."

Nightheart opened her eyes, a new rage filling her entire body to the brink. "Don't you *dare* go *near* Rabbitspring."

"What if I do?" Thornstar challenged.

"I will rip your pelt apart." Nightheart's voice dropped low. "I don't know if you can die again but I can *promise* you that I'll try my best to make it happen."

"For a cat who is afraid of killing other cats, that's a pretty dark threat." Thornstar's eyes glinted.

"You're not a cat, not anymore. You're a nightmare at best, you ruined my Clan, you lied to make and you took endless lives." Nightheart raked her claws across the ground. "You are a tick on the back of AshClan, and I will make sure you're removed."

"But how will you stop me? What will you did if I'm Rabbitspring's dreams? You can't get to her, and you'll be asleep and you'll never know until...it's too late."

Nightheart gave a fierce yowl and charged forward. *Thornstar crossed a line, he knows how I feel about her!* She tackled Thornstar to the ground and raked her claws down his pelt as hard as she possibly could, making his blood splatter against the decaying forest floor. "If you touch one hair on her pelt, I will kill you!" Thornstar dug his claws into Nightheart and threw her off, he charged after her as she landed but Nightheart was back on her paws before he reached her. She jumped forward and leapt over him, landing on his back. She kicked him as hard as she could in the back of his neck, making his body crumble.

She turned and sank her teeth into the back of the neck where she

had kicked him, she dug her claws into his flesh and tore his pelt open. "This is what will happen if you harm Rabbitspring, only I will make to shred your entire pelt."

Nightheart let him go and jumped off. Thornstar stood up slowly, blood pouring from several wounds on his body. "Maybe you really did teach me something." Nightheart snorted. "I'm stronger than *you*."

Nightheart opened her eyes, she was finally back in the warrior's den. She could hear the rain still as it poured violently overhead. There was a single drip in the den, but it wasn't landing on any of the warriors. Nightheart looked over at Rabbitspring, she was sleeping peacefully with the occasional twitch, but that was common.

Nightheart peered through the entrance and noticed it was just past dawn. Stormheart along with Primroseheart, Foxfeatheather, Petalshine and Harewhisker were gone. *They must be the dawn patrol.* Nightheart didn't really feel like facing the rain just yet so she remained in her nest for a little while longer, keeping a close eye on Rabbitspring.

One thing that Thornstar said was still clinging to her pelt like a burr, if Thornstar attacked Rabbitspring how would Nightheart know? She couldn't just avoid sleep for the rest of her life, she had to make sure that Rabbitspring would be okay. *I know what I have to do.* Nightheart didn't want to, but it was the only way to make sure that she was safe.

It was well past dawn when Rabbitspring finally woke up. The small she-cat stretched out her limbs and let out a heavy yawn. "Good morning, Nightheart." She purred, making Nightheart's heart ache. *She's so adorable.*

"Good morning." Nightheart replied. "Look, before we get sent on patrols, could we step outside of camp for a while. I really need to tell you something."

Rabbitspring blinked, she was clearly confused but gave a nod. "Sure, we can head out now." After a moment of stretching,

Rabbitspring stood up and she and Nightheart headed out of the warriors den and out of camp.

Nightheart led her a good ways away from camp, towards the valley that provided an entrance into the territories. She had to make sure that no one would overhear their conversation.

"Okay," Rabbitspring sat down. "What's going on, Nightheart? Is this why you've been acting so weird lately."

"Kind of." Nightheart did one last search of the area before she decided they were completely alone. "It's...really complicated and i-it might make you hate me." She dropped her head, sitting down and slumping her shoulders.

"Why would *anything* make me hate you? That's impossible." Rabbitspring assured her, they had originally sat across from each other but Rabbitspring closed the gap and sat down right beside Nightheart.

"You haven't heard it yet." Nightheart didn't want to do this, but she had no choice. She had to tell Rabbitspring the truth. "W-When I was an apprentice, I was visited by Thornstar in my dreams..."

Rabbitspring blinked. "He visited you? Or you just dreamt of him?"

"He visited me, I didn't trust him at first because of what he did to AshClan, but he said he would...train me. He told me that he would train me to protect my Clan above everything else, and that I would be able to become one of the best warriors in the forest."

"You didn't believe him did you?" Rabbitspring's words drove a thorn deep into Nightheart's chest. *This is a mistake.* She thought painfully, she didn't respond which gave Rabbitspring her answer. "Oh..." She looked away.

"I was an apprentice, I was gullible and desperate to prove myself. The Clan hated my mother and they blamed me and Blackstorm for what she did. I love AshClan, and I just wanted to protect them." Nightheart took a shaky breath. "I trained with him in my dreams for a long time, until we lost our connection with StarClan because

of the forest, I lost my connection with him too.

"Then we had the journey, and the training continued when we got here. It was normal until he made me fight with Falconheart...who was training with another cat from the Dark Forest."

"I see." Rabbitspring stared at her paws. "So that's why the fight between you and Falconheart seemed so...personal."

"I realized then that I was being trained to be a killer, that Thornstar never really cared about me or AshClan, he wanted me to become *him.* So I turned my back on him, but he pulled me into a dream last night where he....he threatened you."

"Me?" Rabbitspring suddenly anxiety flooding her eyes, making guilt rip Nightheart open. "Why would he threaten me?"

"B-Because I care about you...he knows that." Nightheart flattened her ears.

"But you care about your brother too, so why not him?" Rabbitspring was starting to get very upset.

"B-because..." Nightheart trembled, could she really tell Rabbitspring how she felt *right now?* It seemed like horrible timing.

"Because *what*, Nightheart?" Rabbitspring stood up. "You tell me all of this and now you won't tell me why Thornstar wants to kill me?"

"Because you mean more to me than any other cat in this forest!" Nightheart shouted, unable to contain her emotions any longer. She stood to face Rabbitspring so she could look her in her shock filled eyes. "Because you are the most important cat in my life, I care about you so much that sometimes it hurts. You keep my mind clear and you make me feel like I could walk on the clouds.

"Rabbitspring, I don't just want to be really close friends with you. I want to always be by your side, I want to be here for you, I want to fight for you and protect you!" Nightheart dropped her head, feeling exhausted and drained. "A-And if Thornstar does anything to you...I'd never be able forgive myself."

There was a long moment of silence, the only sound was the rain that fell against the two warriors and the forest floor. Nightheart was terrified at her response. *She's going to hate me, she's not going to want anything to do with me ever again.*

"Nightheart..." Rabbitspring finally broke the silence. "I-I don't hate you for training with Thornstar, I really don't." Nightheart slowly lifted her head. "You were just trying to help your Clan, and you were young. You realized how wrong it was at the right time."

"W-What about...all the other stuff." She dropped her head again.

"I just wish you would've told me sooner." Rabbitspring stepped closer once more, putting her tail under Nightheart's chin. "You're the brave one out of the two of us, I was expecting you to belt out your feelings first. Though whenever I imagined it...it wasn't quite the this dramatic."

Nightheart looked up, meeting Rabbitspring's gaze once again. "What do you mean?"

"I feel the same way about you, Nightheart. I just thought I was alone for a while...then I realized how you were acting around me. I want nothing more than to spend all of my time with you, I already do." She chuckled.

Nightheart couldn't believe her ears. *Rabbitspring feels the same way? About me?* Nightheart stepped forward, burying her muzzle into Rabbitspring's wet fur. "I can't tell you how happy am I to hear that. I don't deserve you, Rabbitspring, I really don't."

"I just want you to be happy." Rabbitspring purred, nuzzling Nightheart's cheek. "I want *us* to be happy, together."

Chapter 25

Honeyfrost clawed the comfrey root out of the muddy soil, covering her white paws with thick mud. She picked up her bundle of roots off the ground and started to head back towards camp. Rain poured overhead with thick, dark clouds covering the sun and leaving the forest in a dreary light. Honeyfrost hated the rain, but her mind was too clogged with other thoughts for her to really care about her muddy paws or soaked pelt.

Her mind constantly shifted from Snakewhisker to Blackstorm, both cats bringing horrible pain to her heart and chest. She wished that she could talk to Snakewhisker about Blackstorm, she knew he would understand. Whenever she thought of Blackstorm she could feel her heart break every single time. She hadn't seen him since Pebblestep caught the two of them, nearly ten sunrises ago.

She didn't know what to do, she wanted to see him again but now that Pebblestep knew, it was incredibly dangerous. She didn't want to get Blackstorm in trouble, but at the same time she would give anything just to see him again. Her mind was constantly a storm of pain and heartache swirling in her head, and she couldn't clear it.

Honeyfrost reached camp with her comfrey root and took it to the medicine cat den, wiping her paws on the stone outside before stepping inside. She saw Pebblestep inside, sorting herbs and looking worried. While she was out, Honeyfrost had forgotten that she never told Pebblestep she was going out to collect herbs.

As Honeyfrost stepped inside, Pebblestep looked up, relief flooding her eyes as she jumped to her paws. "There you are!" She mewed with exasperation and ran up to Honeyfrost. "I was wondering where you went, when I woke up you were gone I was worried you had gone back to Blackstorm."

Honeyfrost winced slightly. "No, I just went to collect some comfrey root." She nudged the roots with her paw. "We were running low."

"But it's pouring out there, you're going to give yourself a cold." Pebblestep argued. "You can't just go parading around in the rain like this."
"Sorry." Was the only word Honeyfrost could find, she didn't really care if she got sick right now. She picked up the comfrey root and put it in their herb store. She heard a sad sigh from behind her and Honeyfrost felt guilt creeping in on her. *I'm upsetting Pebblestep.* Honeyfrost thought, sitting down in her nest. *I'm making this whole situation worse for everyone.*

"I know you're upset about Blackstorm, Honeyfrost." Pebblestep sat down beside Honeyfrost, but Honeyfrost refused to look at her mentor, she let out a heavy sigh and stared down at her paws.

"I can't focus on anything else, and along with Snakewhisker's death I just...can't clear my head." She closed her eyes, seeing only Snakewhisker and Blackstorm.

"Maybe you should take a trip to the Spirit Garden." Pebblestep suggested. Honeyfrost looked up in confusion.

"You want me to go to the Spirit Garden? Why?" Honeyfrost didn't know what going to the Spirit Garden would do for her.

"You can seek guidance from StarClan, that's what I did after Poppyfur died. I made a trip to the Moonstone to seek help, her death had been such a shock that I could barely focus on my duties. I travelled there alone and was able to talk to Poppyfur, she helped me and I was able to become the medicine cat I am today, even in death."

Honeyfrost sighed. "It's worth a shot, but I don't know how many medicine cats will want to talk to me. I broke the medicine cat code."

"You're not the only medicine cat to do it, and you certainly won't be the last." Pebblestep rested her tail across Honeyfrost's shoulders. "On the next day we have without too much rain, you should take a journey. I promise it will clear your mind."

Honeyfrost looked up at the sky, it was early morning with only a

few traces of clouds. It had been two days since Pebblestep suggested she go to the Spirit Garden for guidance and the rain was finally starting to clear up a little.

"Why are you doing this again?" Dawnstar questioned, clearly nervous about sending her daughter across the territories alone.

"Honeyfrost needs some guidance." Pebblestep answered for her. "She's been struggling ever since Snakewhisker's death and she needs help from StarClan, it's the same as when I went for guidance after Poppyfur died."

"I guess." Dawnstar still looked uneasy, she turned her concerned green gaze to Honeyfrost. "Just be careful, okay? If the rain returns please ask either AshClan or LichenClan for shelter for the night I know things are still tense with AshClan, but I doubt they would turn away a medicine cat in need. Return as soon as you can." Dawnstar touched her nose to Honeyfrost's forehead. "I hope you find the help you need."

"Have you had your travelling herbs?" Pebblestep questioned.

Honeyfrost nodded. "I have. I'll be fine, I promise." The assurance was mostly for Dawnstar, she had made this journey many times before with other cats, so how hard could it be alone?

"I'll be back soon." Honeyfrost promised and left the camp after saying goodbye to her mentor and mother. Dawnstar said she would tell Lionclaw and Falconheart and Pebblestep wouldn't tell them the full reason she needed to talk to StarClan.

Snakewhisker is only part of it. She thought as she left the hollow through the thorn barrier. It was a long walk, and she was used to having the other medicine cats to talk to but at least she would have some time to think by herself.

As Honeyfrost travelled she let her mind wander. She thought of Snakewhisker, she wondered if she would see him tonight or if she would just talk to Honeywing like she usually did. Her mind soon shifted to Blackstorm, she wondered how he was holding up with them not being able to see each other. She tried to picture him in

AshClan, living happy as a medicine cat but even picturing his icy blue eyes was enough to break her heart once more.

She wondered what would happen if they really did give up everything, if they both stopped being medicine cats and she joined AshClan so she could be with him. She tried to imagine what would happen. Would they have kits? Would Riverstar accept that? She tried so hard to form the image in her head, but Honeyfrost couldn't imagine her life as anything but a medicine cat in SunClan.

She didn't think it would ever be possible for her to turn her back on the Clan and job she loved so much. *So what did I want out of the relationship with Blackstorm? What was a dreaming of when I first met him?* She wondered, unable to find an answer. *Why does nothing have an answer anymore?*

It was dusk by the time Honeyfrost reached the path to the Spirit Garden, and she was certain that it would be night by the time she reached the top. Honeyfrost started climbing the smooth stone path towards the cavern. She remembered the first time she had come here, in a dream with Honeywing, when she had seen the gathering place for all StarClan cats and their medicine cats.

Sure enough, the moon was slowly starting to take over the sky when Honeyfrost reached the entrance to the cavern. She began her descent into the cave, down the gentle slope into the Spirit Garden. The moonlight made the star-shaped flower in the center of the cave glow.

"Alright." Honeyfrost whispered quietly, laying down in front of the flower. She tucked her legs under her chest and closed her eyes, willing for StarClan to take her into a deep sleep. "Let's go."

Honeyfrost opened her eyes and she was no longer in the Spirit Garden, she was in a different forest. She sat up, looking around. The mountains were nowhere in sight, she wasn't in the new territories. She breathed the air and she could smell SunClan and oak trees, she then quickly realized where she was. *I'm in SunClan's old territory.*

She was near the river border to the old gathering hollow, but the

trees weren't dead. They were alive and as strong as they were when Honeyfrost was born. *Why am I here?* Honeyfrost asked herself, turning in a circle, looking for Honeywing. "Honeywing?" She asked into the night. "Are you there?"

"Not Honeywing." A familiar voice spoke and Honeyfrost watched as the stars formed the shape of a cat, the stars eventually showed the cream and black fur of Poppyfur. "I'm glad you came here tonight, Honeyfrost. I was planning on talking to you on the night of the half-moon, but the sooner the better."

"Why are we *here* though? I know we're in SunClan's old territory, but why?" Honeyfrost questioned. "There wasn't anything special about this place, not that I can remember anyway."

"This place is special for me." Poppyfur sighed, sitting down. "Well, I wouldn't call it special. More of a painful reminder."

"What do you mean?" Honeyfrost sat down with the old medicine cat.

"This is the place where Honeywing was killed."

"Oh..." Honeyfrost quickly realized why Poppyfur was brought her here. "I see." She stared at the grass. "How exactly did she die?" Honeyfrost questioned, wanting to put off the topic of Blackstorm as long as she could. "Pebblestep told me a little bit, but I feel like there's more."

"It was a battle with LichenClan, Honeywing ran out to get more herbs while I stayed behind to treat our Clanmates. After she didn't return for a long time, I grew worried. We had no herbs and my mentor was out here in a ruthless battle. I left Flowerstar, or Flowerpelt at the time to watch over the injured cats and I ran out here to find her.

"I got here where I found Branchfur pinning her to the ground. He had been waiting for me." A dark shadow crossed Poppyfur's eyes. "I had told him a few days ago that we could no longer see each other and he was upset about it, but I didn't think it would drive him to kill someone I loved. He told me that I had to make a choice, my

Clan or him. I chose my Clan. I knew I had angered him, but I didn't realize how much until the battle. He wanted me to hurt as I had hurt him so he killed Honeywing.

"He looked down at her dead body and told me it was my fault, Honeywing had told me to take the herbs back and so I did. I didn't know what to do, I was so lost and confused when I returned, but my Clan needed me."

Honeyfrost stared at Poppyfur, she couldn't imagine having to watch Pebblestep die, she treasured her mentor dearly. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"It was my fault." Poppyfur sighed. "No matter how many cats tell me that it isn't, I will never be able to forgive myself. I've found my peace, but in the end it will always haunt me." Poppyfur cleared her gaze and looked down at Honeyfrost. "You know why I'm telling you all of this, don't you?" Honeyfrost just nodded. "Now, I don't think that Blackstorm will kill anyone if you reject him, he's not that kind of cat. He's a very respectable medicine cat, you both are."

"So, what? You're going to tell me that if I stay with him something bad happens, you're going to tell me to follow my heart?" Honeyfrost challenged, lashing her tail. She was so sick of hearing the same advice over and over again.

"Yes and no." Poppyfur replied, Honeyfrost blinked in surprise. "Yes, if you keep up your relationship with Blackstorm something bad will happen. One of you will get into trouble, Pebblestep is kind but what about Skyfeather? What about Riverstar? You know very well that Blackstorm has struggled with his Clan in the past due to his mother being Echoheart, what do you think his Clan would think of him if they found out?"

Honeyfrost flattened her ears. "I doubt they would be happy." She sighed. "I just wanted to be happy."

"You still can be." Poppyfur rested her fluffy tail on Honeyfrost's shoulder. "Even after Honeywing's death I still found happiness. I was happy being a medicine cat. Each time I helped a kit with a thorn in their paw, I might have complained that kits were being

too sensitive but once they looked at me with shimmering eyes and thanked me for helping them, it filled me with pure delight. Being able to train Pebblestep into a wonderful medicine cat and guiding your mother through her hardships. Even now, I get to watch over SunClan from StarClan.

"I know this hurts, Honeyfrost. It will continue to hurt for a while, but I promise that in the end both you and Blackstorm will find happiness. That's all I want for the two of you. I would say "follow your heart" like Honeywing, but I have a feeling you already know where your heart belongs, don't you?"

Honeyfrost nodded slowly. "Yeah. I do." She dropped her head. "I just don't want it to go there."
"You have to." Poppyfur touched her muzzle to Honeyfrost's head, just as Dawnstar had done earlier. "It's time for you to wake up, and you know what you have to do."

Honeyfrost lifted her head, she was back in the Spirit Garden. She slowly sat up, her heart heavy. She didn't need anymore cats to tell her, she knew exactly what had to be done. She just didn't want to do it. Honeyfrost stood up and headed out of the Spirit Garden, she needed to find a way to talk to Blackstorm before too long.

Honeyfrost stepped out of the Spirit Garden and into the night air, the sky had grown incredibly dark with thick storm clouds hiding the moon. "Great." Honeyfrost grumbled and started quickly heading down the mountain.

She had to get home before the rain hit, but her hopes of that happening were slim as she already started to feel cold raindrops hit her pelt and by the time she reached the base of the mountain the rain was pouring down. Honeyfrost did her best to push through the rain, she didn't want to stay in another camp tonight and the closest one was AshClan's, she would just have to endure it.

She had gotten closer to AshClan's territory and her pelt was heavy with water and she shivered from the torrent. "Who's out there?" A voice demanded from AshClan's territory, Honeyfrost froze in her tracks, narrowing her eyes as she tried to peer through the rain.

She saw a pair of green eyes through the rain and soon enough, Stormheart stepped into view. "Honeyfrost?" He mewed. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing out here?" He had to speak loudly over the rain.

"I was visiting the Spirit Garden." Honeyfrost replied. "I didn't know it would get this bad when I left."

"Well you can't travel all the way back to SunClan territory in this weather, you'll get washed away before you do. Come and stay with us, I'm sure Riverstar will let you." Stormheart stepped in beside Honeyfrost. *Great. Just what I was trying to avoid.* Honeyfrost thought bitterly. *At least I'll have a chance to talk to Blackstorm.*

Chapter 26

Honeyfrost walked beside Stormheart as he led her back to his patrol. "Why are you patrolling so late? And in this rain?"

"Patrols went out a little late today, and I wanted to get all the patrols done so its only myself and two others who were fine with going out into the rain." Stormheart explained. Honeyfrost saw shapes in the distance, she noticed the dark tabby pelt of Ravensong and the light brown fur of Harewhisker.

"What did you find?" Harewhisker questioned, then rested his eyes on Honeyfrost. Immediately his ears flattened and Ravensong's bristled.

"What is a SunClan cat doing near our territory? Stealing more prey?" Ravensong accused, Honeyfrost tensed and hid behind Stormheart, at least he was kind.

"Relax you two." Stormheart commanded. "Honeyfrost is a medicine cat, she was visiting the Spirit Garden and got caught in the storm.

"So what are we going to do with her?" Harewhisker questioned, not taking his glare off of Honeyfrost.

"I'm going to ask Riverstar if she can take shelter here for the night." Stormheart explained matter-of-factly, walking past his Clanmates. Honeyfrost followed, trying to make herself look as small as she possibly could.

"Are you crazy? Did you forget that we just had a huge battle with SunClan? Kind of resulted in the death of the deputy." Ravensong and Harewhisker quickly followed Stormheart.

"We didn't have a battle with Honeyfrost, she's a medicine cat. She healed cats, just as Blackstorm and Skyfeather did."

"But--"

"No, buts!" Stormheart hissed, cutting off Harewhisker and turning on him. "Honeyfrost did nothing wrong and she needs our help. If one of my daughters was out in this storm I would be more than grateful if SunClan provided them with shelter. I'm sure Dawnstar will feel the same way. If Riverstar says no then I will walk her back to SunClan camp myself."

In that moment, Stormheart reminded Honeyfrost of her own father. She knew that he father would fight endless battles for her, he would travel through a terrible storm of snow or rain to make sure she was safe. *I'm lucky that Stormheart found me.* Honeyfrost stayed close to the gray tom, doing her best to ignore Ravensong and Harewhisker.

Honeyfrost had also noticed that both AshClan cats had silenced themselves when Stormheart yelled, like he was giving orders. *Maybe Stormheart is the new deputy?* Honeyfrost theorized, she felt happy knowing that such a caring cat could possibly be deputy.

The rain continued to drench the patrol and Honeyfrost as they reached AshClan camp. Honeyfrost noticed that Nightheart was the one keeping watch for the night. As Honeyfrost came into her view, her yellow eyes turned into venom as she glared at Honeyfrost. It was more than distrust, it was hate. *What did I ever do to Nightheart?* Then realisation struck her light lightning. *Unless she knows about Blackstorm...*

Honeyfrost flattened her eyes and tried to avoid Nightheart. "What is *she* doing here? Nightheart demanded.

"She was caught in the rainstorm." Stormheart explained once more. "I'm going to ask Riverstar if she can stay here with us for the night." Nightheart opened her mouth to complain as Harewhisker and Ravensong did, but Stormheart raised his tail to silence her. "I already explained it to these two, I won't be explaining it to you as well. Keep watching." He growled and marched past Nightheart.

Even as they walked past the black she-cat, Honeyfrost could feel her gaze shredding her pelt. *If looks could kill, I would be torn apart.* Honeyfrost thought with a shudder. "You two can go get some sleep now." Stormheart told Ravensong and Harewhisker. The two

hesitated, but after a sharp glare from Stormheart, they retreated to their dens. However, Honeyfrost doubted they would keep their mouths shut about her being here.

Honeyfrost looked around, she hadn't seen AshClan camp before. It was big and spacious, but the sickly scent of rain-drenched pine was almost too much for her. Her eyes scanned the various dens, wondering which one of them was the medicine cat den. She was in Blackstorm's camp, did he even know it yet?

Stormheart led Honeyfrost to a large cavern in the back of the camp, which Honeyfrost assumed was Riverstar's den. "Riverstar? Are you awake?" He called into the den, waiting patiently for a response.

"Yes, I am. Come on in Stormheart." Riverstar's voice was kind, something that Honeyfrost wasn't sure she had ever heard before. She was fairly certain that it wouldn't last. Honeyfrost stepped into the den along with Stormheart and upon seeing the SunClan medicine cat, Riverstar's pelt stood on end. "What is the meaning of this? Why did you bring her here?"

"We were patrolling and I found her on the other side of the north border. She had been visiting the Spirit Garden and had gotten caught in the storm." Stormheart explained for the third time.

"Why were you at the Spirit Garden?" Riverstar narrowed her sharp blue eyes. Blackstorm's blue eyes were icy and calming, but Riverstar's were like a surging storm, they made Honeyfrost feel incredibly small.

"I needed some guidance from StarClan. When I left earlier it didn't look like it was going to rain this bad. I wasn't expecting it." Honeyfrost lowered her head, hoping that if she showed some respect towards Riverstar she would be kinder.

"I wanted to ask if you would allow Honeyfrost to stay with us for the night. No cat should be stuck out in a storm like this, it's cold, dark and muddy. She could easily slip and get hurt. If one of our cats was stuck out in a storm like this surely you would want another Clan to provide them with a safe shelter."

Riverstar stared down Honeyfrost a long moment and Honeyfrost feared that Riverstar would turn her away. She hadn't originally wanted to stay, but staying in AshClan camp sounded a lot better than walking through this horrible storm. Finally, Riverstar sighed. "You're right, Stormheart. She can stay, but she needs to be escorted back home as soon as possible tomorrow. She can stay in the apprentice's den since we don't have any right now. I'll have Blackstorm bring her some fresh moss and prey."
At the mention of Blackstorm's name, Honeyfrost tensed. "N-No i'll be alright." She tried to assure Riverstar through her shaky voice.

"There's no moss in the apprentice den, and have you eaten since you left for the Spirit Garden?" Riverstar questioned with narrowed eyes.

"No." Honeyfrost stared at her paws, she had taken travelling herbs to quell her hunger, but they had worn off during her dream. She felt hunger clawing at her.

"It's not a big deal." Riverstar mewed, standing up. "Come with me, I'll lead you to the apprentice den." The leader had relaxed slightly and had turned kind once more. Honeyfrost followed the leader, keeping her head low. Several AshClan cats had been made aware of the situation and were delivering her harsh, cold glares.

"What's the meaning of this, Riverstar?" One of the AshClan warriors stepped forward, it was Dustfall. "Why is there a SunClan cat here?" He stared down Honeyfrost, she wanted to hide behind Riverstar but she stood where she was.

"Honeyfrost was visiting the Spirit Garden and got caught in this storm." Riverstar explained gently to the warrior. "We will be providing her shelter until tomorrow morning, and I'm *not* going to argue about it." Dustfall flattened his ears, keeping his hostile gaze on Honeyfrost. "She's a medicine cat, she won't do any harm."

Riverstar walked past Dustfall and Honeyfrost noticed with alarm that they were heading towards the medicine cat den. Her heart twisted in knots. *I hope Blackstorm is already asleep.* She prayed silently as they approached the bramble enforced holly bush that Honeyfrost assumed was the apprentice den.

She passed the medicine cat den as Skyfeather and Blackstorm stepped out of the entrance. Blackstorm looked at her with pure shock and confusion while Skyfeather looked at her with suspicion.

"Good," Riverstar mewed once she noticed Blackstorm. "I was hoping you were awake, Blackstorm. Honeyfrost is staying with us for the night to get out of the storm, would you get her a piece of fresh-kill and some moss?"

"Uh, sure." Blackstorm gave an awkward nod at Riverstar and walked out of his den and into the rain. Honeyfrost looked away from him, staring at the stone floor as they grew closer to the apprentice den. Honeyfrost stepped inside the den, it was empty with the exception of some stay scraps of moss.

"Blackstorm should be in here soon." Riverstar mewed. "If you need anything you can ask him, or you know where my den is."

"Thank you, Riverstar." Honeyfrost dipped her head respectfully. "It really does mean a lot."

"You're welcome, Honeyfrost." Riverstar dipped her head in return. "Hope you have a good night's rest."

The blue-gray leader turned and walked of the den, leaving Honeyfrost alone in the apprentice den. She sat down, idly playing with a dusty scrap off moss while she waited for Blackstorm.

She supposed that this as a good a place as any to finally talk to him, she just wasn't sure that talking to him in his own camp was a good idea. Perhaps she could find a way to talk to him outside the camp before she left in the morning.

Pawsteps approached the den and Honeyfrost lifted her head as Blackstorm's icy blue eyes came into view. She struggled to calm her racing heartbeat. "Hey." She greeted bashfully, shuffling her paws.

Blackstorm set down the moss as well as a large squirrel, just looking at the squirrel made Honeyfrost's mouth water. "What are you doing here?" Blackstorm questioned, his voice low. "This is the

last place I expected to see you." He started forming a nest for her. "What did Pebblestep say? Did you get in trouble?"

"Well, not really." Honeyfrost shuffled her paws. "She wasn't exactly happy, but she wasn't mad. Either way," Honeyfrost shook her head. "This isn't place to talk about...us." She looked away, taking a deep breath. "But we *do* need to talk." She forced her gaze back to Blackstorm who looked incredibly anxious. "See if you can convince Riverstar to let you escort me home tomorrow. We'll finally have a moment to talk."

"Alright." Blackstorm didn't see convinced, he stood up after making her nest and took a deep, shaky breath. He started to walk out of the den, but stopped for a moment, glancing over his shoulder. "I'm really glad to see you."

Honeyfrost stayed silent, watching Blackstorm walk out of the apprentice den. She sat alone in the dim den, the sound of rain pouring on the ceiling overhead. She stared at the prey that Blackstorm had brought her. The thought of talking with Blackstorm tomorrow made her heart twist in pain. She knew that no matter what, it would be their last time talking alone together.

Honeyfrost slowly ate the squirrel Blackstorm had brought her, she wasn't looking forward to saying goodbye to Blackstorm. She didn't want to, she wanted to keep meeting with him, she wanted to he happy with him, but Honeyfrost knew that it wasn't an option.

She finished eating the squirrel and curled in in the nest that Blackstorm had made her. AshClan moss smelled like pine trees instead of oak trees like SunClan's did and she could feel a few pine needles digging into her skin.

I don't think I could ever live in AshClan. Honeyfrost thought, closing her eyes. *Just another reason that Blackstorm and I can't be together. He probably loves the smell of pine, I can't stand it.* Honeyfrost slowly drifted off to sleep, thoughts of Blackstorm filling her head until she slipped into the world of dreams.

Honeyfrost sat outside the apprentice den, waiting for Blackstorm. It was very early morning, not long after dawn and she was waiting

for Blackstorm to escort her home. Riverstar had agreed to let him take her home, and she was excited to finally go home but she was also terrified of her upcoming conversation with Blackstorm, she didn't know how he would take it, but she had no choice.

Blackstorm stepped out of the medicine cat den, looking back inside for just a moment. He then rested his eyes on Honeyfrost, she noticed him taking a deep breath. "Come home as soon as she's back in SunClan, okay?" Riverstar mewed towards her medicine cat. "You shouldn't have to go into SunClan territory, I'm sure that Honeyfrost knows her way through her own territory.

"Alright, Riverstar." Blackstorm mewed, approaching Honeyfrost. From behind him, in the medicine cat den, Skyfeather watched with distrust. *Does he know too? Surely if Pebblestep figured it out, Skyfeather has too.*

"Thank you, again, Riverstar." Honeyfrost dipped her head at the AshClan leader. "I'll be sure to let my mother know how kind you all were."

"It's my pleasure, Honeyfrost." Riverstar purred. "Travel safe you two, and may StarClan light your path."

"Are you ready?" Blackstorm mewed, clearing trying to hide his conflicting emotions. Honeyfrost nodded and together, the two medicine cats headed out into the pine forest. The rain had stopped during the night, but the forest remaind wet and the sky was still plagued with dark clouds, it wouldn't be long before the rain returned.

Honeyfrost and Blackstorm walked side by side through the trees and for a moment, it went back to the days of them sneaking out at night. However, Honeyfrost knew that they could never go back to those days, a choice had to be made.

"So." Blackstorm said awkwardly, avoiding eye contact with Honeyfrost. "What did you want to talk about?"

Honeyfrost closed her eyes and stopped walking, she could hear Blackstorm's pawsteps stop as well. *Just do it, Honeyfrost.* She told

herself, she had to force the words to come out. Honeyfrost could already feel her heart breaking. "Blackstorm I---" She stammered, this was the hardest thing she ever had to do. Honeyfrost opened her eyes and looked at Blackstorm, he finally met her gaze. "We...we can't do this anymore."

Blackstorm's ears flattened and immediately looked away, Honeyfrost felt her heart shatter like ice. "I'm sorry." She whimpered. "But, we have responsibilities. We live in two seperate Clans, we have to call it off."

"I know." Blackstorm's voice was low and pained. "I just never wanted it to happen." He sat down, looking up at the cloudy sky. "Part of me hoped that we could hide like this forever, when we were apprentices I never thought of the future. I only thought of the present, I never *wanted* the future to come." He shifted a pile of pine needles with one paw. "I was foolish, but now we have to face the truth."

Honeyfrost padded over to him, sitting down beside him. "This is the hardest thing I've ever done." She said quietly, staring at her golden and white paws.

Blackstorm leaned against Honeyfrost and she closed his eyes, taking in his warmth for the last time. She didn't want this moment to end, she didn't want to say goodbye. If she had her way, she would stay like this, with him, forever. She would never turn away, never see anyone else.

"I know it doesn't matter now, but I feel like I should say it." Blackstorm spoke up. "But, I love you, Honeyfrost. I've loved you for a very long time, and I'm sorry I didn't say it before it now."

Honeyfrost stared at Blackstorm in shock, her heart continuing to fall apart. "Blackstorm I--" Her voice shook, she held back a sob and pressed her nose deep into his jet black fur. "I love you too." She pressed as close to him as she could, Blackstorm wrapped his tail around him. "I will never love anyone else the way I love you."

The two of them stayed together in silence for a long time, Honeyfrost kept her eyes closed. She wanted to forget about the rest

of the world, she only wanted to stay here with Blackstorm. *Nothing else matters.* Despite her thoughts, Honeyfrost knew that wasn't true.

How can I walk away? How can I turn my back on him? Honeyfrost wondered, she honestly didn't know if she had the strength. *How is it possible? He's my one and only, but it was never meant to be.* A cold drop of rain splashed against Honeyfrost's pelt. *Is this a sign? The final sign to tear us apart?*

Blackstorm forcefully pulled himself away. "You should go, I'm sure your Clanmates are worried." Honeyfrost stood up, locking her gaze with his. She never wanted to forget this moment, she never wanted to forget those icy blue eyes.

"I-I'll see you at the half-moon." Honeyfrost said hopefully. *But it won't be the same. This is the end of us.* "Goodbye, Blackstorm." Using all of her strength, Honeyfrost turned away from Blackstorm. Her paws felt like they were weighed down by stones, but she kept on walking. *Don't look back.* Honeyfrost told herself. *If you look back, you'll never look away.*

Honeyfrost walked through the pine trees, only keeping her eyes ahead of her. She was walking alone through AshClan territory, Blackstorm was supposed to escort her the whole way but neither of them could stand to be together anymore. She knew her way, and soon Honeyfrost would back in her home, without him.

Honeyfrost approached the camp, the rain fell slowly, just above a drizzle. A perfect representation of the feeling inside her chest. She slowly climbed down the stone slope, spotting Dawnstar having a serious conversation with Lionclaw. When Honeyfrost stepped into the camp, her mother spotted her.

"There you are!" Dawnstar crossed the camp in a few swift bounds, nuzzling Honeyfrost's cheek. "I was about to send out a patrol to find you."

"Sorry." Honeyfrost dipped her head. "I stayed the night in AshClan's camp. Riverstar was very kind to me."

"That's a relief." Dawnstar sighed as Lionclaw approached.

"We're so glad that you're home. I was really worried about you." Lionclaw nuzzled her other cheek, both of their eyes were filled with deep concern. *At least I have my family.* Honeyfrost thought gratefully.

"Did you find the answers you needed?" Dawnstar asked, referring to her trip to the Spirit Garden.

"I did." Honeyfrost nodded slowly and relief flooded Dawnstar's green gaze. "But it's a long walk from AshClan camp, I think I want to rest for a little." Honeyfrost gave a sweet goodbye to her parents and padded slowly across the hollow towards the medicine cat den, she knew Pebblestep would be asking about her trip; and probably about Blackstorm as well.

Honeyfrost stepped inside the den, Pebblestep was organizing berries in the back of the den. Upon hearing Honeyfrost enter the den, Pebblestep looked up with a spark of excitement in her blue eyes. "Welcome home." She purred and approached Honeyfrost. "Where did you end up staying last night?"

"AshClan." Honeyfrost flattened her ears.

"I see." Pebblestep looked away. "Did you find guidance at the Spirit Garden?"

"Yes, I did." Honeyfrost sat down, toying with a stray piece of bracken. "Poppyfur told me what I needed to do."

"And..?"

Honeyfrost sighed. "Blackstorm and I ended things." She told her mentor. "I didn't want to, but I know it had to be done."

"Well, I'm sorry you had to do such a thing." Pebblestep said quietly. Honeyfrost felt her emotions welling up inside her, she felt like she was getting ready to break. Suddenly, Honeyfrost jumped to her paws and fell against Pebblestep.

"I didn't want to do it! I didn't want to say goodbye to him." She sobbed into Pebblestep's gray and white fur.

"I know you didn't." Pebblestep wrapped her tail around Honeyfrost. "But you did the right thing, even if it hurts." Honeyfrost didn't say nothing, she just pressed against her mentor for comfort. "I want you to know something, Honeyfrost." Pebblestep mewed. "I am so incredibly proud of you, I am so grateful that I can call you my apprentice."

Honeyfrost stepped back, feeling warm and loved by Pebblestep's words. "Thank you, Pebblestep." Her body trembled, her heart still ached from saying goodbye to Pebblestep but she was so lucky to have a mentor like Pebblestep who cared about her. "I'm so happy that I'm your apprentice."

Chapter 27

Falconheart set his fresh-kill on the pile, now hidden in a crack in the stone hollow wall to keep it dry. Rain continued to pelt the forest and soak the pelts of every creature living in the mountains. Feeling empty, Falconheart turned away from the pile and looked around his camp. Most of the Clan was hiding in dens or out hunting in the rain. He spotted Sedgefern having what seemed like a pleasant conversation with Rosewind and Flamepetal. The sight made Falconheart's heart twist, he had to force himself to look away.

He knew that Sedgefern and Rosewind were close friends, but he couldn't help but wish he was talking with her right now. They hadn't spoken since their argument several days ago, they had been assigned to patrols together but Sedgefern acted like Falconheart didn't exist. The pain of being ignored and hated by her had consumed his thoughts. He wanted to reach out to her, to apologize and tell her how he was feeling. He wanted to tell her everything, but he knew she would just end up hating him.

Falconheart flattened his ears and turned away. *She's happier without me in her life, anyway. It's for the better.* With a low sigh, Falconheart picked up a piece of fresh-kill to take to Cherryleaf. He didn't have much else to do so he figured he would visit his former mentor and her kits.

With the large squirrel in his jaws, Falconheart approached the nursery and poked his head inside. Cherryleaf was lying her nest watching her kits play with a small stick. "It's a snake!" Bluekit cried out, pouncing on the the stick. "I got it first!"

"You're not strong enough to kill a snake!" Windkit teased. "We have to kill it *together*." She announced, jumping on the stick along with her stick. Snowkit followed up on her sisters, sinking her teeth into the wet bark of the stick. Watching them reminded Falconheart of the games he used to play with Honeyfrost when they were kits.

Honeyfrost never wanted to fight, but she loved play catch. *I guess I*

see why now. Falconheart felt guilt creeping up on him once more. *I used to think it was annoying that Honeyfrost didn't want to play fight.* He treated her poorly when they were kits, but now he would give anything to be a kit again. No battles, no Falconclaw, just him, Honeyfrost and their mother.

"Good morning, Falconheart." Cherryleaf purred once she saw him, getting his attention as well. "Is that for us?"

"Yeah." Falconheart mewed, nudging the squirrel towards the queen. Once the three kits noticed, they rushed over to the squirrel.

"Thank you, Falconheart!" Snowkit mewed loudly, her eyes shimmering as she started to nibble on the prey, her sisters doing the same. Cherryleaf watched them, purring loudly. As Falconheart watched her, he noticed the sheer amount of love in her green eyes. *I wonder what it's like.* Falconheart thought. *Having kits to love.* He was far too young to have kits, but he did think about from time to time.

Falconheart wasn't sure what else he could do in the nursery, Bluekit, Windkit, and Snowkit would eat quickly and then Cherryleaf would finish off what they didn't eat. After that the kits would probably sleep, he didn't think there was much use for him in there.

After saying goodbye to Cherryleaf and her kits, Falconheart left the nursery once again confused on what to do with himself. The rain fell steadily and all the patrols for the moment had been assigned. Letting out a quiet sigh, Falconheart sat outside the warriors den, waiting for some cat to need him.

Falconheart waited for a while, then he noticed two cats walking towards him with an aggressive purpose. Petalbreeze and Dovepool were marching towards him with anger deep in their blue eyes. *This can't be good.* Falconheart thought, ducking his head slightly. Ever since his and Sedgefern's argument, her sisters had been giving him toxic glares.

"Can I help you?" Falconheart questioned once they approached.

"Yeah you can." Dovepool hissed, lashing her tail. "You can apologize to Sedgefern." She bared her sharp teeth.

"We don't know what you two fought about," Petalbreeze joined in. "But whatever it was you hurt Sedgefern and we won't stand for that."

"Look," Falconheart began to speak but was harshly cut off by Dovepool.

"I don't want to hear your excuses!" The tabby she-cat spat. "I want you to apologize to my sister! I don't care if the two of you make-up or whatever, but you *will* apologize to her or I'll claw your ears off!"

Without giving Falconheart a chance to respond, the two sisters turned on their paws and stormed off, lashing their tails in sync. Falconheart let out a groan, he didn't know if Dovepool would *actually* claw his ears off, but they were right; he had to do something about this. Hiding from Sedgefern for the rest of his life wouldn't solve anything, it would probably make things worse even.

Falconheart scanned the camp for Sedgefern, she was still talking with Rosewind, but Flamepetal had left the conversation. Falconheart didn't want to do this in front of Rosewind, but he was pretty sure that he had no choice. He had to swallow his pride and talk to Sedgefern.

Forcing himself to stand up and cross the camp, Falconheart swallowed his fears only for them to come right back up. *Stop being a coward.* He had been nearly killed by Falconclaw, coyotes and rogues and yet this was the most terrifying thing he had ever done.

He neared the two she-cats, Rosewind noticed him first and gave him a questioning look. When Rosewind turned her head, Sedgefern had noticed Falconheart as well. She narrowed her green eyes, annoyance sparking in their depths. "What do you want, Falconheart?" Her words cut deep into his heart.

"Can I uh--talk to you, Sedgefern? Outside the camp." He forced himself to speak, stammering through each word.

Rosewind and Sedgefern shared a look, sending anxiety racing through Falconheart's body. "I should let you two do that." Rosewind said, standing up quickly. "I have a hunting patrol later." Without much else to say, Rosewind quickly trotted off towards a gathering patrol near the camp's entrance.

Falconheart and Sedgefern were now left alone, he forced himself to look at Sedgefern who let out an irritated sigh. "Fine, let's get this over with." She stood up and began walking towards the entrance. Falconheart followed, dragging his tail on the wet forest floor. *She hates me.* Falconheart thought pitifully.

Sedgefern and Falconheart made it a good ways out of camp before Sedgefern came to a stop. "Well." She demanded, staring Falconheart down. "What do you have to say?"

"I uh--" His voice caught, Falconheart took a deep breath. *I have to do this.* "I wanted to say I'm sorry, about what happened between us. Your sisters--"

Sedgefern loud out a loud groan. "So that's what this is about?" She stood up, lashing her fluffy gray tail. "I don't want you to apologize because you're scared my sisters will hurt you, I want you to apologize because you *mean it.* So unless you actually want to try and fix what you did I don't want to talk to you."

Sedgefern began to walk away, clearly already fed up with Falconheart. *I can't let her leave!* Falconheart jumped in front of Sedgefern. "Please don't go!" He shouted, Sedgefern stopped and glared at him. "I *do* want to apologize and I *do* mean it. I want to fix this." He dropped his head and slumped his shoulders. "I never wanted to hurt you, that's the last thing I ever want." Sedgefern stayed quiet, it was all up to him. "I've ruined so many different things in my life, I almost got Mudfall killed when I was a kit, I nearly ruined my relationship with my sister and I've killed two different cats."

Falconheart looked up, locking his eyes with Sedgefern's. Her annoyance was fading, but she still didn't look happy to be there. "Out of all the disasters and pain that I have caused throughout my life, I never wanted you to be part of it. I *never* wanted to hurt you,

because you're the one cat in this forest who actually keeps my head clear."

Sedgefern's eyes filled with pain and concern, she dropped her ears slightly. "Sedgefern, I don't expect you to forgive me but I want you to know that I *do* care about you, and I do want to fix this."

There was a long moment of silence between the two warriors, Falconheart didn't know if Sedgefern would say anything, and he didn't know if there was anything else he could say. Finally, Sedgefern broke the painful silence with a sigh. "Falconheart, I care about you. I've always looked up to you. When we were kits, when we were apprentices and even now as warriors. You've always been strong, fierce and brave. You always fought so hard to protect what you loved, and I admired that about you." She lowered her head. "We became closer and I saw that you weren't the arrogant cat that everyone thought you were, I saw past that and I knew you were actually a very caring, and compassionate cat.

"But then I realized that through after everything you still didn't trust me. You still keep secrets and I don't know why. I just want you to trust me! I want to help you."

Falconheart lowered his head. "I do you trust you." He looked away, closing his eyes. "I don't trust myself." Falconheart sat down, his claws digging into the muddy ground. "I killed two cats, I ruined the lives of their loved ones. I'm a monster, and I didn't want to bring you down. I can't handle this guilt, but then I hurt you and the guilt got even worse." He closed his eyes, the storm of guilt raged in his body once more, causing his whole chest to ache.

"Falconheart..." Sedgefern's voice was soft like heather to his ears. He felt Sedgefern sit beside him, her gray pelt brushing up against his. "You're *not* a monster." She spoke quietly.

"What would you call someone who killed two cats?" Falconheart opened his eyes, keeping his amber gaze on the forest floor.

"You killed Hornet because he was going to kill your sister, you killed Ashblaze because he took one of your mother's lives. Yes, Silvermoon will be hurting over his death."

Falconheart winced. "Everyone tells me the same thing. They tell me that I was justified in what I did because I'm a warrior. It's the life we chose to live, but that doesn't make me feel better. Yes, we risk our lives but it doesn't mean it's any better when we die. Silvermoon and her kits will have to live without Ashblaze, and it's all my fault. I'm a monster."

"Let me ask you something, Falconheart." Sedgefern mewed, pulling his gaze towards her. She stared at the cloudy sky. "When Thornstar killed cats, when he killed Lionstar do you think he felt the guilt you are feeling right now? Or when Echoheart killed her own sister do you think she felt guilty?" Falconheart opened his mouth to speak, but Sedgefern refused to let him talk. "They didn't, if they did they wouldn't have caused the deaths of many more. *They* are monsters. You're consumed by guilt, you care about what Silvermoon is feeling. That's why you *aren't* a monster, because you *care.*"

Falconheart stared at Sedgefern, surprised by her words. *If I killed him and no, I don't regret it. I don't regret almost killing Flowerstar either.* Falconclaw's words echoed in Falconheart's mind. Falconclaw was a monster, he took lives without remorse, without caring. *I'm not Falconclaw.* "I--" Falconheart spoke, staring at his paws. "I really needed to hear that."

Sedgefern nudged him with her shoulder. "I know." She purred confidently, then wrapped her tail around his shoulders, Falconheart felt his pelt burn. "It's amazing what can happen when you let someone help you."
Falconheart ducked his head sheepishly, his pelt burning hotter. "Yeah," He said. "I'm sorry that I didn't let you help me sooner."

"It's okay." Sedgefern sighed. "I'm sorry I acted the way I did, I guess it really wasn't fair. I was just frustrated. I want to be there to help you, and you weren't letting me. You were hiding things, and that's not what friends do."

"I know." Falconheart shuffled his paws. "And--there are things that I can't tell you right now." Sedgefern stiffened. "I'm not ready to, yet, but I promise that I will." He looked up, locking his amber gaze with hers. "When I'm ready, you'll be the first to know."

Sedgefern let out a loud purr, her body relaxing. "That's all I want." She brushed up against him and stood up, leaving his pelt tingling with electricity. "We should go back before this becomes a downpour."

Falconheart nodded and stood up, following Sedgefern back to camp. It felt as if the storm in his head and heart had finally cleared away, there was still an inkling of guilt but with Sedgefern by his side, he would be able to get past it. *Everything is finally looking up.*

Chapter 28

Blackstorm stared at the herbs he had just spent the entire morning organizing. They were pristine and perfectly sorted. He had cleaned their entire store and got rid of all the old, hey dried out herbs with no use. Blackstorm felt like he had nothing else to do, and it distracted from the dull ache in his heart from losing Honeyfrost.

It had been several days since they parted ways in AshClan territory, but the sting was still fresh in his mind. He knew that it was the right choice, he knew that they had their responsibilities and that their Clans came first. Despite knowing all that, it didn't make him feel any better about it.

Life in AshClan camp had been peaceful, everyday that passed after Ashblaze's death made their lives seem a little more normal. Silvermoon was staying strong for her kits, and Stormheart was proving to be an excellent deputy. In just a few moons Sagekit and Hailkit would be apprentices and everything would feel like normal again.

If an entire Clan could recover after the loss of a beloved and respected deputy, surely Blackstorm could recover after turning his back on Honeyfrost, couldn't he? With a deep sigh, Blackstorm padded slowly out of the medicine cat den to see if he was needed anywhere. With the rain, most of the elders had been complaining about stiff joints. The rain wasn't falling now, but dark clouds loomed overhead, threatening to soak the forest once again.

"Blackstorm!" At the call of his mentor, Blackstorm turned his head towards the center of camp where Skyfeather was sharing prey with Ravensong. "Now that you're done in the medicine cat den I'd like it if you would go collect some coltsfoot. Harewhisker said he saw a whole bunch of it growing by the river near the entrance into the territories.

"Alright." Blackstorm's tone was bland, but he gave a nod and started heading out of camp. He hoped that he wouldn't be caught

in a rainstorm, but he figured it shouldn't take him too long to collect the coltsfoot. The longest part of his task would be the walk to and from the river.

Blackstorm noticed the river through the dark pine trees and walked along its bank so he wouldn't miss the yellow flowers. There was a chilly breeze in the air that carried the scent of damp pine and rain. The scent was sweet, and for a moment it made Blackstorm feel happier. He was happy, he was happy for his Clan. They had found such a perfect home, and were living happy lives. Even if *he* wasn't happy, his Clan was and surely that's all that mattered.

He spotted the bright yellow flowers about a mouselength away from the bank of the river, just where Skyfeather said it would be. Blackstorm quickly approached the herb and began biting off the flowers by their stems. He didn't take all of it so the rest could grow back, it was newleaf and with all the rain that had been falling the herbs would be sure to flourish.

As Blackstorm formed a bundle of the coltsfoot, he tuned into the sounds of the forest. He heard birds in the distance, the sound of the river rushing over the rocks. It was fuller than usual, he just hoped it wouldn't flood.

One sound wasn't what Blackstorm was expecting. From in the shadows of the pine trees, Blackstorm heard the rustling of pine needles. He stopped for a moment, lifting his head and breathed in the scent of the forest. He could smell pine, water and herbs but nothing else. Blackstorm narrowed his eyes, he didn't know why any AshClan cats would be out this far. All the hunting patrols were out, and this wasn't a prime spot to patrol since it only lead to the outside of the territory.

Blackstorm hesitated, staying silent for several moments waiting for the sound to return. All he heard were the sounds of the forest, not feeling any looming dangers Blackstorm dropped it. He assumed it was a squirrel and returned to collecting the coltsfoot with a shrug.

He was nearly finished wrapping the herb when he heard pawsteps. "I know medicine cats aren't fighters," A hauntingly familiar voice

spoke from behind Blackstorm, causing his entire body to stiffen. "But I think they could use a *little* more caution when out in the forest."

Blackstorm turned slowly, his blue eyes locked with her murky green gaze. His heart pounded in his chest, she had a dangerous sneer that contorted the long scars down her face. "Echoheart." He breathed out his mothers name. How did she did get here? Why was she here? Blackstorm's fur bristled as she looked at him.

"Aww," Echoheart let out a mock-purr. "I'm surprised you remember me." Her friendly gaze twisted into anger. "Since you left me behind."

"What did you expect? You left AshClan behind after betraying them, you really thought you would get an invitation when we left?" Blackstorm challenged.

"No," Echoheart twitched her tail. "But still, my feelings were hurt!" *Liar.* Blackstorm bared his teeth.

"What do you want, Echoheart?" Blackstorm demanded, trying to look fierce. However, he knew that he wouldn't be able to take on his mother. She was a skilled warrior, and he was a small medicine cat with minimal battle training.

"I wanted to see my beloved kits." Echoheart purred, trying to take a step closer towards Blackstorm who took a step back towards the river.

"We both know that's a lie." Echoheart's eyes darkened. He knew that his mother could care less about him or Nightheart. "What do you want." He repeated, his voice low.

"I wasn't going to let the Clans forget about me. I have too much unfinished business." She twitched her ears. "I noticed that the Clans had gone so I followed your trail until I found you. I've been here for a while now and I know *everything* about what's been going on in the Clans." Echoheart's gaze intensified. "Including your little relationship with Dawnstar's daughter."

Echoheart mentioning Honeyfrost made Blackstorm's entire body tense. He didn't want her *anywhere* near Honeyfrost. "You should also know that we ended that. We're focusing on our Clans now."

"Oh yes, but that still doesn't change what happened between you too." Echoheart began circling Blackstorm like he was prey, and he was starting to feel that way. If Echoheart were to attack him, there would be no cat to come looking for him for a long time. He would have to run if he could. "You kits claim that you don't want to be anything like me, and yet you are falling in love with cats from other Clans, and your sister...." Echoheart trailed off. "Well she's on a whole other level."

"What do you mean." Blackstorm growled. "What about Nightheart?"

"Oh you didn't know?" Echoheart purred. "Nightheart has been training with Thornstar in her dreams. Trying to become a stronger warrior. Trying to become like *him*."

Blackstorm stared at his mother in disbelief, why would Nightheart do anything like that? "You're lying. How could you possibly know that?"

"I'm still close with Thornstar, he visits me in my dreams as well. Why don't you ask her? See what she says." Echoheart was taunting him, and he knew it but Blackstorm's mind began to wander. What if it was true? It would explain all of Nightheart's random injuries... Blackstorm shook his head, he had to focus on the threat in front of him.

"You need to leave." Blackstorm growled. "If Riverstar finds you here she'll have you torn apart."

"Riverstar." Echoheart growled. "Riverstar won't be a problem of mine for long." Blackstorm's claws dug into the ground, the threat on his leader made his stomach churn. "I told you, I have unfinished business with the Clans." She lashed her tail, flattening her ears. "Let me ask you something." She continued. "Why would SunClan steal prey from AshClan? They don't exactly have a history with prey theft." Blackstorm swallowed a knot in his throat, why was she

bringing up the battle? "I wanted to see if I could spark a fight between two Clans, the two Clans I hate the most. I stole prey from each Clan and planted it on the others territory, and sure enough they took the bait. I wasn't sure if Dawnstar would, but Riverstar is battle hungry and stupid enough to act when challenged without much evidence."

Blackstorm hissed. "You caused Ashblaze's death!" He spat.

"You think I care?" Echoheart snarled. "I never cared about Ashblaze, I never cared about half that Clan!" Her fur bristled and Echoheart stepped closer. "Ashblaze will be far from the last cat to die."

There was a dangerous spark in her green eyes, Blackstorm felt fear clogging his throat. His eyes began to dart around, he needed to get away from her. His paws trembled and he looked towards the direction of camp. *I need to get out of here and warn Riverstar.* Blackstorm began to run, but Echoheart had clearly already anticipated that.

In the blink of an eye, Echoheart slammed Blackstorm into the ground, her large paws pinning him against the forest floor. "You think I'd let you leave right now?" Blackstorm struggled to get away, feeling the sheer force of her weight press down into him. "I need you to give a message to both AshClan *and* SunClan." Her breath was right in his ear. "Tell them that I'm back, and that I'm not alone. I will tear AshClan apart, and then take the fight to SunClan. Dawnstar took *everything* from me, so I'll take everything from her. I'll kill her mate, her son and even her pathetic little daughter that you love so much." Blackstorm tried to fight back, rage fueling inside him

"Don't you dare touch Honeyfrost!" Blackstorm spat, Echoheart tightened her grip on his ribs, pain spreading throughout his body.

"And what are you going to do about it? You're a medicine cat." Echoheart laughed and let Blackstorm up, but before he could run away she lashed out with razor sharp claws. Blackstorm felt her claws rake down the side of his face, and felt blood welling in the wounds. "Now run along little kitty, be sure to pass on my

message!"

Without thinking, Blackstorm took off back towards camp. The coltsfoot was long forgotten, he just wanted to get home and to get away from his mother.

Blackstorm ran as fast as he could, only slowing down when he reached the outskirts of camp. He had been gone long enough that rain was starting to fall slowly, drops hitting Blackstorm's pelt.

The wounds on his face stung, but they didn't feel deep. *I need to tell Riverstar right away.* He thought and continued the rest of the walk into camp. His heart was still pounding from both fear and his run back to camp.

As Blackstorm stepped into camp, Nightheart noticed him. "Hey, there you--" She cut herself off when she spotted the bleeding claw marks on his face. "What happened to you?" Blackstorm felt anger sparking inside his chest, he didn't want to believe what Echoheart said about Nightheart training with Thornstar, but a large part of him did.

"I'll talk about it later." Blackstorm mewed sharply, brushing Nightheart off. "I need to talk to Riverstar."

"Wait," As Blackstorm walked past her, Nightheart quickly ran after him. "You can't just walk away, you're hurt!"

"I'm fine." Blackstorm hissed.

Nightheart flattened her ears. "What is your problem? I'm just trying to look out for you. What happened?"

"You want to know what happened?" Blackstorm whirled on her. "It was our mother. Echoheart is back and she did this me. He lashed his tail. "Now that you know, let me go talk to Riverstar!" He turned and didn't give Nightheart a chance to respond. He reached Riverstar's den and stepped inside without asking permission.

Riverstar was inside along with Stormheart as the two discussed patrols. They noticed Blackstorm right away and looked at him with confused eyes. "What do you need, Blackstorm?" Riverstar

questioned, then noticing the wound on his face. "What happened to you?" The leader was on her paws and hurried over to Blackstorm.

"It was Echoheart." Blackstorm replied.

Riverstar took a step back, her eyes widening. "Echoheart?"

Blackstorm nodded slowly. "She followed the Clans, and she attacked me. She told me to tell you that she's not alone, and she wants to destroy the Clans. Namely, SunClan and AshClan."

Riverstar sat back down, disbelief flooding her eyes. She let out a saddened sigh. "I suppose it was foolish to think that I had seen the last of Echoheart when we left the old territories. I wanted to believe I would never see her again, so I wouldn't have to fight her anymore."

"That's not all." Blackstorm added. "She's been spying on us, and she's the one who stole prey from both SunClan and AshClan. She wanted to start a battle between us."

Riverstar stared at the ground, a haunting shadow crossing her face. "And I played right into her paws. I should've tired to work things out with Dawnstar...Ashblaze wouldn't be dead if I did."

"There's no use focusing on that." Blackstorm interjected. "We have to focus on the current threat, and we need to warn SunClan. Dawnstar needs to know about Echoheart's threats, we can't let them get attacked without being prepared. Innocent lives could be lost."

"I know." Riverstar took a deep breath. "I just have to hope that SunClan won't throw us out the second they see us."

Blackstorm, along with Riverstar and Stormheart reached the SunClan border. They had left as soon as Riverstar decided to warn SunClan about Echoheart's return. The last thing Blackstorm wanted to do was see Honeyfrost again after they had said goodbye, but he couldn't risk her safety over his feelings for her. *SunClan is in danger, and they need to know.*

Riverstar stopped them at the border. "We will wait for a patrol, we can't risk angering SunClan. If Dawnstar will even want to talk to us."

"Dawnstar is a logical cat." Stormheart pointed out. "If we tell her and her Clanmates that we have urgent news about their Clan, they will listen to us. They have to."

Blackstorm remained silent, he didn't even want to come along but Riverstar insisted. She said that he was the one who faced Echoheart and he would need to be the one to pass on the information to SunClan.

They waited for several moments before Blackstorm heard pawsteps through the oak trees. Through the trees emerged a SunClan patrol lead by Cinderflame. Her amber eyes spotted the AshClan cats and narrowed, the rest of the patrol stared them down with hatred and distrust.

"I told you I smelled something weird!" The apprentice, Burnpaw, piped up proudly. His mentor, Cloudspots silenced him with his tail.

"What are you doing here, Riverstar?" Cinderflame demanded sternly.

"If you've come to accuse us of stealing more prey you might as well just attack us now." Redclaw growled, but Goldenleaf hushed him.

"Let them explain themselves." She urged.

"Well?" Cinderflame's ears twitched.

"We have important information to pass on to Dawnstar. Information that could put SunClan in danger if we don't tell her now." Riverstar explained urgently. "All I ask is that you escort us to your camp so we can pass this news onto Dawnstar."

"Why can't you just tell *us* and we can pass it onto Dawnstar?" Fawnheart questioned, narrowing her green eyes.

"The message is from Blackstorm." Riverstar motioned towards Blackstorm who remained silent. "I promise we mean no harm and

as soon as we pass this news on we will leave your territory."

Cinderflame thought for a moment, and Blackstorm feared that the SunClan deputy wouldn't let them through. However, Cinderflame finally sighed and gave a nod. "Very well, Riverstar. We will escort you to our camp."

"Should we trust them this quickly?" Fawnheart questioned her deputy. "Last time AshClan was in our territory they attacked us."

"There's only three of them." Cinderflame explained. "And one of them is a medicine cat. We will keep a close eye on them, but if they believe it's urgent then we should trust them." The gray she-cat turned her attention back towards the three AshClan cats. "Follow us, but we will be watching you."

"Thank you." Riverstar dipped her head, and she along with Stormheart and Blackstorm followed the SunClan patrol into their territory. They left the AshClan border behind and walked deeper into the oak trees.

"So are you the new deputy?" Redclaw questioned Stormheart, the gray tom refused to take his attention off the path ahead.

"I am." He replied bluntly, not giving anymore attention. After the long walk through the territory, they finally reached the stone hollow where SunClan made their home. The thorn barrier stood tall and protective over the camp, this was the first time that Blackstorm had actually seen SunClan's camp.

Cinderflame guided the AshClan cats down the smooth slope into the hollow. Blackstorm pinpointed the leader's den quickly, a large crack in the back wall of the hollow. As they stepped into the camp all of SunClan instantly began glaring at the AshClan warriors. Riverstar and Stormheart held their heads high, ignoring the toxic glares. Blackstorm had to force himself to do the same.

He noticed a smaller cave not far from the leader's den, in the entrance he spotted the judging eyes of Pebblestep. His entire body tensed, and and Blackstom forced himself to look away.

They reached the leader's den and Cinderflame stepped inside. "Dawnstar?" She said inside. "We have visitors."

"Come in, Cinderflame." Dawnstar welcomed her deputy, and the group stepped inside. The rest of the SunClan patrol had broke off once they reached camp, Blackstorm assumed they would quickly tell all their Clanmates that AshClan was in their home.

Once Riverstar came into view, Dawnstar narrowed her eyes. "Riverstar." She mewed, her voice low. "Why are you in my camp?"

"My medicine cat, Blackstorm, has important news that SunClan *needs* to hear." Riverstar explained, bowing her head at the SunClan leader.

"Well then," Blackstorm felt overwhelming intimidated as Dawnstar's bright green eyes bore into them. "Share this news, Blackstorm."

Blackstorm cleared his throat. "Well uh," He felt his entire body tense. "I was out gathering herbs when I was attacked by Echoheart." Dawnstar and Cinderflame visibly tensed. "She tracked us down when we left, and she's planning on attacking the Clans. She threatened AshClan and SunClan directly, as well as your family, Dawnstar." Dawnstar's eyes clouded with fear and protection for her family and Clan. "She's also the one who stole prey from our two Clans. She wanted to start a fight."

"On that subject," Riverstar stepped forward. "I want to apologize for my actions." She bowed her head. "I should've talked with you about it before I acted. Next time I won't be so quick to fight, I can promise you that."

"I'm glad to hear that." Dawnstar bowed her head in return. "And I appreciate you coming to warn us of Echoheart. As well as providing shelter for my daughter during that storm."

"I would've wanted the same thing for one of my cats." Riverstar mewed.

"If Echoheart does happen to attack one of our Clans," Dawnstar

added. "We should tell each other, we need to be prepared for her. We can't let her get us by surprise."

"I agree." Riverstar nodded. "We should also send messages to MoonClan and LichenClan, they're in danger as well. I could send a small patrol to LichenClan if you send one to MoonClan."

"I could do that." Dawnstar stood up, waving her tail. "You should head back to your camp before the rain gets worse. Thank you for warning us about Echoheart. Cinderflame can escort you back to your border."

"Thank you, Dawnstar." Riverstar bowed her head one last time and the AshClan cats were guided out of the den by the SunClan deputy. As they stepped back into the rain, Blackstorm noticed that most of SunClan was gathered, keeping a close eye on the AshClan cats. He turned his gaze towards the medicine cat and Honeyfrost was standing outside, confusion and concern lining her face. At the sight of her, Blackstorm's heart began to ache and he forced himself to look away.

He ignored the pain and tried to focus on the positive. The meeting between Riverstar and Dawnstar had gone well, despite everything. Riverstar admitted her mistakes, and they agreed to help each other. *Perhaps peace is still possible between the two Clans.*

Chapter 29

Blackstorm, Stormheart and Riverstar returned to AshClan just as the sun began to set on the forest. Blackstorm's legs ached, the wound on his face faintly burned and he was just ready to close his eyes and leave his horrible day behind. Blackstorm hadn't eaten since earlier in the morning, but he wasn't hungry. He was sad, scared and annoyed, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Blackstorm had nearly reached the medicine cat den when Nightheart cut him off. Blackstorm flattened his ears and let out a groan. "Will you tell me exactly what happened now?" Nightheart questioned, her eyes fierce and annoyed. Blackstorm didn't have the patience to deal with his sister right now.

"Nightheart, I'm really not in the mood." Without saying anything else, Blackstorm shoved his way past Nightheart and into the medicine cat den. Skyfeather wasn't anywhere in sight, he had probably gone to collect the coltsfoot that Blackstorm had left out in the forest after running from his mother.

Much to Blackstorm's annoyance, Nightheart followed Blackstorm into the den. "What is your problem?" She demanded with a low growl in her voice. Blackstorm's tail twitched irritably, he refused to look at her.

"I was attacked by our mother and then had to walk all the way to and from SunClan. I'm tired and in pain, I want to sleep." Blackstorm hoped that Nightheart could see just how sick of her he was.

"We need to talk about her." Nightheart urged. "Our mother is back in the territories! She attacked you."

Blackstorm rolled his eyes. "I'm very aware of that."

"I'm just trying to look out for you!" Nightheart's voice was getting louder.

Blackstorm suddenly whirled on his sister, his black fur bristling along his spine. "I don't need you to look out for me." He growled. "I'm doing just fine, thanks."

Nightheart was getting visibly angry as well. "Oh, are you? I wasn't so sure." She lashed her tail. "Are you sure you're not too busy fawning after pretty SunClan she-cats?"

Blackstorm's eyes widened. *She knows about Honeyfrost?* Blackstorm felt anger raging inside him like a violent storm, his claws scraped against the stone floor of his den. "What do *you* know about Honeyfrost?"

"I know everything." Nightheart growled. "I know that you two have some kind of relationship going on even though you're both medicine cats."

"You know everything do you?" Blackstorm stepped closer to Nightheart, feeling his anger rage harder. "You don't know *anything!*" Nightheart flattened her ears. "Yeah, I snuck out at night to see Honeyfrost but guess what, we stopped. We stopped not because Pebblestep caught us, but because we both knew we had a responsibility to our Clans. A responsibility you couldn't *possibly* ever understand. You will *never* know what this is like, to have to turn your back on a cat you love because you're from two different Clans and followed a path that prevents you from falling in love.

"You get to have a mate, you get to have kits and none of you warriors ever stop to consider how hard it is to give that up!" Nightheart's eyes began to flood with guilt but Blackstorm didn't stop. "All that matters to you warriors is fighting! You mindlessly tear each other apart while demanding that your medicine cats work endlessly into the night to make sure that you don't die."

"Blackstorm I--"

Blackstorm didn't let her finish. "You act like you're so high and mighty, you constantly talk about how arrogant Falconheart is but you never once considered how arrogant *you* are." Nightheart lowered her head. "Talking constantly about how humble and noble you are *is* arrogance." Blackstorm felt relief, finally unleashing all of

his anger onto Nightheart. "And don't you dare act like you're the perfect one of Echoheart's kits. She told me that you train with Thornstar."

Nightheart's entire body stiffened. *So it's true.* Blackstorm thought painfully, he wasn't sure until now. "I-I don't do that anymore. I stopped."

"And I stopped seeing Honeyfrost and yet here you are." Blackstorm turned away from his sister. "Just go, Nightheart. I told you what was wrong with me, now *go.*" There was a long moment of silence, Blackstorm stared at his paws. After a few, long moments, Blackstorm heard Nightheart's pawsteps leave the medicine cat den.

Feeling even more exhausted, Blackstorm flopped down into his nest and closed his eyes. *Please, end this day before it can any worse.*

Blackstorm woke up even feeling even more exhausted than when he went to sleep. It was just before dawn and Skyfeather was still sleeping soundly in his own nest. Blackstorm lifted his head and let out a long yawn. The events of the day before still hung in his mind, blocking out everything else like a thick veil of fog.

He thought about his fight with Nightheart and felt guilt creep in. *I was really hard on her.* He thought sadly. *We used to be so close.* Blackstorm recalled when they were apprentices, they were so close; they had to be. The Clan looked at the two of them with disdain, always seeing the shadow of Echoheart in them.

Then Nightheart started becoming a respectable warrior, she made friends and earned her way into the Clan. She fought hard and was incredibly skilled, Blackstorm couldn't help but feel that her training with Thornstar played a large part in that. Blackstorm was respected by Skyfeather, Riverstar and a few other cats in the Clan but he wasn't as well respected by his other Clanmates.

The entire Clan looked to Skyfeather for their healing, Blackstorm was just his apprentice and nothing more to most of him. *We took two very different paths.* Blackstorm thought. *But it shouldn't have driven us apart like this.*

The medicine cat was quickly becoming incredibly stuffy, Blackstorm needed some fresh-air. He quickly padded out into the camp and breathed in the chilly morning air. There was a slight drizzle, with small raindrops falling slowly onto the forest floor. Blackstorm looked over to the center of camp where Stormheart was sending the dawn patrol consisting of Primroseheart, Harewhisker, Petalshine and Haresong. They left the camp and into the dreary morning.

Blackstorm's ears twitched as he heard playful squeaks coming from the nursery. Blackstorm was surprised to hear that the kits were up so early. He stood up and padded over to the nursery to take a look. All five kits were playing with pine needles and moss while their mothers watched with exhausted eyes. Silvermoon and Puddleclaw were clearly not ready to be awake.

"They're up early." Blackstorm purred with amusement as he stepped into view.

"Oh you have no idea." Silvermoon said through a yawn. "They've been up for a while now, we just can't fall back asleep."

"I would like just a *little* more sleep." Puddleclaw mewed, stretching out her paws.

It was then when Blackstorm got an idea, he could use something to distract him and the queens needed some much needed sleep. "I could take them for a little. I could show them the medicine cat den, maybe even put those restless paws to work." He chuckled.

The mention of something new instantly caught the attention of the kits. "You want to take us to the medicine cat den?" Slatekit piped up.

"What's it like in there?" Mistkit questioned.

"You'll have to find out." Blackstorm replied, then looked to the two queens for confirmation.

"Are you sure, Blackstorm?" Silvermoon and Puddleclaw shared a concerned look. "Five kits can be quite the pawful."

"Skyfeather will be there help me, I know how much he loves visiting Hailkit and Sagekit anyway." Blackstorm assured them. "You two need sleep, and its my job to make sure that the cats in my Clan are healthy, even if that means taking some kits while they get some sleep."

"Well..." Puddleclaw thought for a moment. "Alright, Blackstorm. We'll come get them when we wake up."

"Alright." Blackstorm nodded and looked down at the kits who eagerly waiting. "Let's go kits." Without waiting for Blackstorm, the five kits raced from the nursery and towards the medicine cat den. "Wait for me!" Blackstorm called and ran after the kits, perhaps he did bite off more than he could chew with these five.

Hailkit reached the den first, but the other kits were close behind. It occured to Blackstorm that Skyfeather might not have woken up yet. Blackstorm hurried into the den and saw that Hailkit and Sagekit had already began climbing their uncle. Skyfeather was sitting up looking alarmed and confused. He looked at Blackstorm as he stepped into the den. "It appears we've been invaded."

Blackstorm chuckled, not even being stormed by a horde of kits could make Skyfeather mad. "I told Silvermoon and Puddleclaw that I would watch them for a bit while they got some extra rest."

"Ah," Skyfeather shook the kits off and stood up. "Two medicine cats and five kits, what wonders will today bring." He purred and the kits instantly began exploring. "Just don't eat anything in here." The pale tabby began smoothing out his fur. "What are we going to do with these five today?"

"We could show them some herbs." Blackstorm suggested, he didn't think that any of them had any interest in being a medicine cat, but kits liked to learn new things.

"Please do!" Dewkit chimed in, and her siblings along with Hailkit and Sagekit agreed eagerly.

"Alright then." Skyfeather reached into the herb store and pulled out several herbs. He pushed forward some juniper berries. "These are

juniper berries, we give them to cats to stop belly aches."

"I think I was given juniper once." Sagekit mewed. "Back in the old forest, I remember having a really bad belly ache!"

Skyfeather nodded. "It wasn't anything major," he purred. "One juniper berry did the trick for you." Next, Skyfeather nudged some marigold. "We use this for treating wounds." Blackstorm and Skyfeather continued teaching herbs to the kits for a long time, the only kit who didn't seem interested at all was Slatekit. The dark gray kit wanted to play and fight more than anything. *He's got his father's spirit.* Blackstorm thought with a snort, Slatekit was certainly going to be a pawful well into his apprenticeship.

The kits remained in the medicine cat den until just before sunhigh when Silvermoon showed up to take them back to the nursery. The kits left the medicine cat den a mess, but Blackstorm had enjoyed the time spent with them. They were energetic and cheerful, something that Blackstorm had really needed to be a around.

But as Blackstorm cleaned up the den, his couldn't help but worry about the future. Echoheart's prescenane loomed over the forest, they had no idea where she was, what she was planning or when she was planning to do it. They couldn't live peacefully, they had to patrol harder and be more cautious. *How long until Echoheart attacks, and how many lives will she take with her?*